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The Doctor Detective in Texas.

BY LIEUT. A. K. SIMS.



THE COMMANDER REELED BACKWARD INTO THE ARMS OF DAYLIGHT; AND THE PRISONER, LEAPING TO A CHAIR, HURLED HIMSELF LIKE A CANNON-SHOT THROUGH THE WINDOW.

The Doctor Detective in Texas;

OR,

Jack Karbun and the Cowboys.

A Romance of the Mystery of the
Golden Coffin.

BY LIEUT. A. K. SIMS,

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"TEXAS TOM-CAT" NOVELS, ETC.

CHAPTER I.

DEATH AND DIAMONDS.

THE sun of the great desert land of the Southwest shone down on a scene that, strange and terrible as it was, has had many counterparts.

A firing squad of a dozen men, wearing the garb of the U. S. Army, was drawn up in line with military precision, with guns held in readiness to belch forth their contents of death.

Before them, with hands bound and with bandaged eyes upturned in prayer, knelt one, dressed as themselves; and whose life, by the stern command of a hastily-called military tribunal, they were about to take.

A mournful wind, finding its way down from the mountain, whistled through the scanty leaves of the parched cottonwoods in the sandy *arroyo*, as if it piped a solemn requiem. All else was silent in presence of the dread specter hovering with sable wings above the head of the condemned.

This unfortunate one, branded as a deserter, knelt before an open grave, which had been hastily prepared to receive him when the deadly rifles should have done their work.

Notwithstanding this, many men had thought well of Jason Kinglake; had cherished him as a comrade and friend; had loved him as a brother. And there were pained and quivering hearts in the bosoms hidden behind the blue jackets of that dozen men of the firing squad, and tears blinded some of the eyes that glanced over the death-dealing tubes. More than one of those riflemen, held there by the unflinching obedience which the trained soldier always pays to his superiors, prayed in his inmost soul that *his* weapon might not hold one of the slaying bullets.

Yet Jason Kinglake had been condemned for a crime the most heinous known to the military: He had deserted in the face of the enemy. At least, that was the verdict of the tribunal trying him; and from that verdict, in that far land, no appeal was possible.

In the minds of a few there were doubts of the justness of the decision that was hurrying him into eternity; but though doubting, the soldiers lifted their rifles and awaited the word of command.

"Theirs not to make reply;
Theirs not to reason why!"

Only a few miles away, Victorio's slaughtering band of Chiricahua Apaches were known to be lying like wolves among the mountain crags in the volcanic pits of the high *mesas*. To desert in the face of such foes would indeed be a dreadful crime; one perhaps even deserving of death—and certainly punishable with death at that time. And this was what Jason Kinglake was said to have done. It was what the commander of the expedition, Colonel Armiston, accused him of doing, and it was what witnesses had come forward to verify.

In spite of this testimony, Kinglake had declared himself innocent of any such intention, and had claimed that he only absented himself from the command for a legitimate and necessary reason.

The clicking of the rifle-locks aroused him, and a shudder passed through his frame.

Turning his bandaged face toward the

soldiers, he cried, extending his bound hands heavenward:

"Tell my wife that I die asserting my innocence! Men, if you are men! for the love of Heaven, deliver this message!"

The troopers who, further away, were standing at the heads of their horses, turned aside.

When they looked again, the deed had been done. The rifles were empty; the detail was filing away; and Jason Kinglake, with that appeal on his lips, had passed from the power of erring mortal tribunals to the throne of the Great Judge who can make no mistakes.

Throughout the whole of this dreadful scene, Colonel Armiston had stood before the door of his tent, his alert eyes watchful and observant. There had been on his lips a cynical smile, which vanished, to be replaced by an ashy pallor, as Kinglake's words reached him.

When he saw that the commands of the tribunal had been obeyed, he stepped back into the tent, that tremulous pallor still resting on his lips.

Walking to a little chest, which stood on the ground amid a pile of blankets and accouterments, he took up a small box of strange design, casting from it the folds of cloth that had concealed it.

It was in shape a coffin, but seemed to be made of pure gold. Intricate and delicate traceries were wrought into the lid and around the sides and corners, and there were raised outlines of men, of queer beasts, and of hydra-headed dragons. Its length, breadth and depth could have been compassed by a very few inches of measurement, and its weight, in spite of its solidity, was not great.

Colonel Armiston glanced at it covetously, as he threw aside the concealing cloth. Then he touched a hidden spring, and, the lid of the golden coffin flying back in response, there lay revealed a handful of the most precious gems. There were diamonds, flawless, like great crystals, and of immense worth, and there were rubies of equal value, and a necklace of shimmering pearls.

The pallor faded from his face, as he surveyed these treasures, and into his eyes came a look hard to define. It held the essence of covetousness, and revealed likewise the craft of the thief and the recklessness of the murderer!

"It was a great risk!" he whispered, almost panting the lowly-breathed words. "A great risk, and few would have taken it. Yet it was worth it all. These jewels are fit for a king's ransom. I wonder where that scoundrel, Kinglake, could have got them? Stole them, I'll warrant! He was too poor, and not the sort of man to have come by them rightfully. Well, the poor devil has no use for them, now; and—and—"

He did not audibly end the sentence, but closed the lid with a snap; and, moving to the chest on the ground, placed the golden coffin in it, after having re-enveloped it in the folds of cloth. Then he took a key from a pocket, and securely locked the chest.

Having done this, he drew from an inner recess of his coat a letter, and sneeringly looked it over. It had been written by Kinglake to his wife, when he knew he was to be shot; and had been given to Colonel Armiston by the condemned man, with an injunction to see that Mrs. Kinglake received it. The letter spoke of the coffin, which it declared to be mysteriously missing, breathed the fondest love, and was filled with many protestations of innocence.

This message from the now dead man to the living, desolated woman, Armiston tore into strips, and consumed them one by one in the flame of a lantern, which he lighted for the purpose.

When this had been performed, he turned to the door of the tent.

An officer approaching, saluted and stood

awaiting orders; and this officer, noting the change observable in the colonel's face, wondered that the death of the deserter should have so touched and moved him.

The tents were being packed in readiness for the march which was to begin at once; and Armiston saw that the grave of the unfortunate Jason Kinglake was being filled in.

"Hurry up your men!" he ordered, somewhat curtly. "I am in haste to get away from here! What has happened makes me nervous; and besides, we must try to strike the camp of the Apaches by nightfall. Then, there will likely be some more dead men!"

When the preparations were going forward in a manner to please him, he began his own; and a half-hour later, the entire command disappeared over a knoll in the direction of the mountains.

And that yellow mound, marking a bloody grave, alone remained as a witness to attest the dark deed on that day committed.

CHAPTER II.

AN ODD STEED.

"Ho, Jupiter!"

A young woman, slight as a girl, stopped her odd steed with these words of command, and sat in listening attention, near a mesquite growth on the plains of western Texas.

The branching, scrubby mesquite trees, from among which she had just emerged, stretched far away on either hand, looking not unlike an immense, fruitless old peach orchard.

She was of comely appearance, with a fair face that was burned and tanned by the fierce suns and trying winds. A neat-fitting dress of dark calico, cut after the most approved fashion, lent grace to her person, and on her head was perched a wide-rimmed, flaring hat of brown straw.

But the beholder, had there been one, would have perchance given more attention to the steed than to the rider; for she was seated on a large ostrich, whose wings and tail were decorated with such plumes as would have turned a Parisian milliner green with envy.

Jupiter, the big ostrich, upheld her with ease; though just at that moment he was trembling as if in fear, and more than once evinced a desire to break away at reckless speed over the smooth sward that lay in front of him.

A dull, booming roar, that grew every instant in volume, till it seemed to fill earth and sky, rumbled toward them from the far distance. It was like the reverberation of heavy thunder or the shock of a fierce cannonade; and it had hardly ceased to shake and agitate the air, before a second explosion followed, having ten-fold more volume than the first.

Jupiter leaped under the sound, but the girl restrained his frantic desire to rush away, by repeating the command given, and by jerking rather energetically at a light cord held in her hand, which, tied about the neck of the huge bird, served as a rein.

She pushed the hat back from her eyes, and permitted the wind to play with her curls of brown hair that shone on her forehead; and at the same moment opened her lips in a sneering smile.

"The fools! Those officers at Fort Mesquite haven't half as much sense as I thought. The idea of trying to bring rain in that way!"

She well knew the meaning of that singular bombardment.

The Government, having decided to try the experiment of producing rain in rainless regions by the firing of explosive materials high in air, had sent a party into Western Texas, fully equipped for the trial; and the commander of this party had delegated a portion of the work to the officers and men of Fort Mesquite, one of the few remaining military posts on the Texas plains.

The coming experiment had been the talk of the ranches for weeks; and when that thunderous roar bellowed over the wide reaches, she recognized it at once and understood its meaning. She knew that the people at Fort Mesquite were sending up balloons loaded with the terrible explosive known as "rack-rock."

Again that cannon-like roar boomed over the plains, seeming to make the very earth reel; and again Jupiter leaped and danced about, as if he were treading on hot coals.

"Ho, there! you silly thing! Nobody's shooting at you. I'll begin to think you haven't any more sense in your little head than have the men at the fort. Ho, there!"

So vigorously did she jerk on the rein that Jupiter's neck was pulled far backward, and his head twisted about until his eyes seemed to be staring into her own. His dancing antics had been of so energetic a character that she had been almost hurled from her seat.

Reaching out her hand, she snapped a twig from a thorny mesquite; and, giving the ostrich a cut with it, started him in a spinning gait in the direction of home.

Being now further out in the open, she could see the smoky haze that hung above the distant fort, the result of the "rack-rock" bombardment, and again that cynical smile curled her lips.

This young woman, Crystal Karbun, daughter of old Jack Karbun, the ranchman, it will be seen had ideas of her own; and, like many of her sisters, whether they were right or wrong, she clung tenaciously to them.

Although the daughter of a half-educated ranchman, and reared chiefly on the plains, she had been given many advantages, and had even spent some time at a famous female academy in California. There she had obtained Jupiter, and had brought him home when he was a fluffy, downy thing about the size of a goose. Now, she declared she preferred him as a steed to any horse on the place; though there were smiling cowboys who believed the declaration only an eccentricity.

At any rate, he was odd enough to attract attention, and he was speedy. This was shown by the way he now raced across the crisp, dry grass. There were very few of Jack Karbun's "cow-ponies" that could have equaled his pace.

A pair of jack-rabbits springing up, stared at the big bird before hopping away, as if they fancied he must be the author of those thunderous crashes that came constantly from the direction of the fort; and a spiral of dust, waltzing along like a miniature tornado, seemed bent on a race with the ostrich.

It was a novel and delightful ride, and the girl's cheeks glowed and her eyes shone as she drew in near the ranch-house, leaped down, and removed the cord from Jupiter's neck.

There was a strange stillness about the place, which almost immediately made itself felt. No human form was in sight, and Crystal Karbun looked somewhat anxiously toward the closed door.

A dog skulked from under a stable and ran timidly toward her, but only to be assaulted by a series of kicks from the ostrich, one of which sent him howling and sprawling.

"What is it, Shep?" she inquired, patting him to soothe his hurts. "Why is the house shut up? Where is father?"

He leaped friskily about and licked her hand, but kept one eye over on the ostrich, whose kicks he had learned to fear. There was something in his manner as well as in the ominous stillness that frightened her.

Hurrying up to the door, she opened it, and entered the house.

Then her cheeks blanched under their tan and her eyes took on a look of terror.

The room was in the greatest confusion. A table had been overturned, a chair lay

broken on the floor, and there were everywhere signs of a recent conflict.

Crystal could not understand the meaning of all this, and her heart turned sick with fear.

"Oh, what has happened!" she cried, wringing her hands in a very agony.

Then she hastened to the back door and looked out on the buildings and the big corrals.

With the exception of that ominous quiet and absence of human life, there was nothing to mark any change. She had not expected any of the cowboys to be at home that morning, but her father had been there when she left for that spin on the ostrich, and she had thought to find him still there when she returned.

There had been for some time growing signs of trouble among certain of the cattlemen, who were dividing into factions, and taking sides for and against the boomers and settlers who had lately begun to invade that region. Already there had been an outbreak or two and a semblance of a skirmish, and the soldiers of the fort had been sent out to quell the disturbance.

Her mind reverted to these things, as she hastened toward the corrals, loudly calling her father's name. No response came, and her fears grew stronger.

So far, Jack Karbun had not been mixed up in any of the troubles; but on one or two occasions he had freely expressed his sympathies and preferences, and she now feared that the combat in the ranch-house, whose evidences had been so many and certain, was the result.

If correct in this surmise, there was no determining what had happened him. Many of the cattlemen and cowboys were known to be of a vengeful disposition, and some of them had on too many occasions shown that they held human life very lightly.

From the corrals, Crystal proceeded to the big stables, still calling her father's name, and still possessed by that crushing, indefinable fear.

There came no answer to her calls. The horses and ponies whinnied at her from their stalls, and the faithful Shen, apparently equally crushed, walked dejectedly at her heels.

"Father has been killed! I know he has been killed!" she moaned, laying her head against a post of the corral gate and giving way to her terror and grief in a flood of sobbing tears.

CHAPTER III.

MADDENED INTO RECKLESSNESS.

On the same morning in the year 1892, near the time of the occurrence of the events just related, several excited men were grouped in the room of General Philip Armiston in Fort Mesquite.

There was a temporary lull in the explosions of "rack-rock," though one of the rain balloons was anchored in the parade grounds, in readiness to be sent skyward and blown into fragments, in the hope of assisting in bringing the much-needed rain.

Near it, with its silken envelope inflated, but with the basket resting on the ground, was another balloon. This second, however, was not a rain balloon; but an ordinary gas balloon, in which Lieutenant Arthur Cutwell intended soon to make an ascent, with instruments, for the purpose of measuring the air pressure and determining other meteorological facts concerning the condition of the upper atmosphere.

This balloon was what is termed a "captive" balloon. That is, it was so arranged that its ascent could be guided and restrained by means of ropes fastened to the earth; whereas, the bomb balloons, when cast adrift, were permitted to ascend to great heights, and were then fired by electric wires.

To return, however, to General Armiston's rooms, located at one side of the square, wherein, from a high pole, an American flag was flying.

The general was not in the most agreeable of tempers. He was seated at a table, and looking harshly at a roughly-dressed man, whose weather-beaten face was quite as angry and fiery as his own.

This man was Jack Karbun, the ranchman, whose absence from the ranch-house, distant a number of miles from Fort Mesquite, had so alarmed his daughter.

Karbun had been rudely dragged from his house, an hour or more before, by a detachment of troopers, sent thither for the purpose, by General Armiston, and now stood, or rather sat, before the general, accused of *theft*!

Karbun was not a man of prepossessing appearance, and his negligent attire did not add to his good looks. A rough "round-about," buttoned close up to the neck, and a pair of trowsers that seemed to be the cast-off garments of some soldier, were the most distinguishing features of his dress.

But he was, however, a man of spirit, and loudly denounced what he termed the outrage perpetrated on him.

"Call me a thief, Gin'ral Armiston?" he growled. "You'd better look to your own men. I've an idee that they ain't over and above what they ought to be. Better look to your own men!"

"The evidence against you is, I take it, pretty conclusive!" the general returned. "There is a gold coffin missing from this room, and Lieutenant Arthur Cutwell declares that he saw you come from this room yesterday afternoon with something under your coat."

Jack Karbun returned his intent gaze with a defiant sneer.

"That there young jackdaw accusin' of me? I was in that there room, gin'ral; an' I was in there yisterday afternoon. But I never took out of it any more'n I took in. That there was these 'ere duds of mine, what I've got on my back this blessid minute. If you want 'em, you're welcome to 'em!"

There was another in the room, whose face worked strangely, as he looked from the general to the accused, and back again.

That one was a man of about thirty, in the garb of a frontier scout, with long hair falling to his shoulders, and a head that, uncovered by hat or cap, was lion-like in its poise.

He was known at the fort as Doctor Daylight. Not that that was his name, or that he was a physician by profession. But the real name, Dalite, had the same sound as the word daylight; and on one occasion, he had shown considerable skill in bandaging and dressing a gunshot wound received by one of the soldiers. Hence the title, which seemed destined to stick. He had come there simply as Crofton Dalite, detailed for scouting service on the plains, and was now Doctor Daylight, the friend of every man at the fort.

Crofton Dalite, or as he shall be called in these pages, Doctor Daylight, seemed keenly in sympathy with the accused ranchman, and even ventured a few words in his behalf:

"I think there surely must be a mistake somewhere, general, begging pardon for the interruption. I have known Mr. Karbun almost from the moment I set foot in Fort Mesquite, and have ever regarded him as an honorable man!"

The general frowned, plainly showing he did not relish the interruption.

"You say that the thing stole was a coffin?" Jack Karbun queried. "What in the name of the great Sam Bass would I want with a coffin, even if it was a gold one? I ain't ready quite yet to turn up my toes to the daisies. And a coffin? Why I couldn't carry a coffin under my coat!"

He ended the speech with a light laugh,

but the general did not seem sufficiently amused to join him in it.

"It was a gold coffin, not of great size, but of immense value. I have had it in my possession several years, and would not have parted with it for worlds. I cannot tell you how greatly I valued it. And Lieutenant Cutwell, a man I never knew to lie, says he saw you come from the room with something under your coat. You were in the room, as you acknowledge, and the coffin is missing. Mr. Karbun, you must excuse me, if I refuse to believe what you say on the subject."

There was something more than anger now to be seen in Jack Karbun's face. It was a look of deep inward questioning; and might have meant that he believed he had found a clue that would lead to the conviction of the real thief.

He gave a glance of thanks to Dr. Daylight, cast down his eyes for a moment, and then again looked intently at the accusing officer.

"What is it you want me to do?"

There was a deep undercurrent of bitterness in the slowly-spoken and sternly-emphasized words.

"Restore what you have taken! Bring back the gold coffin; and I will drop the entire matter, and proceed no further against you."

"Gin'ral Armiston, do you know that you're talkin' to a ranchman of Texas? Do you know that I've got enough steers and ponies on that there grass out there to buy you an' yer measly little fort hyer, with all that's in it, coffin throwed in? If you don't know it, I'll take pleasure in tellin' it to you. Do you know furdur, that that mealy-mouthed, stunted little lieutenant you're talkin' about couldn't tell what the truth is if he'd run ag'in it, on the plainest kind of a trail? And as fer you, Gin'ral—"

"Enough of this, sir! Do you mean to insult me? Do you mean to brand me as a liar and a thief?" and General Armiston whitened with a rage which so convulsed him that he rose hastily, overturning his chair.

"I mean that I'm a free, American citizen, an' I don't propose to be drug about by no blue-coated soldiers of Uncle Sam; and I don't propose to be called a thief by nobody! You hear me!"

The officer drew back, as if he half expected the angry cattleman to fly like a tiger at his throat.

"This to me, sir? This to me?"

"Ay! to you, Gin'ral Armiston! Old Jack Karbun may be a fool, but he ain't a thief; an' you bet he ain't no coward! Jist fetch that skunk of a lieutenant up hyer, and I'll make him chaw his words so quick that he'll swaller his tongue."

Karbun's wrath, so long with difficulty held in bonds, was getting beyond control; and those who had seen Jack Karbun's rage, were compelled to liken it to a loosed tornado.

Three soldiers, one bearing handcuffs, had stepped quietly into the room as if in answer to a summons, and now stood regarding the scene in mute amazement.

This seemed a menace which Jack Karbun could not endure. He had too long roamed the plains free and unmolested, his own master and the master of other men, to relish this show of force.

"And more!" he roared, giving his exploding wrath free vent, "I don't 'low no man, be he gin'ral, commodore, high-muck-a-muck, er what not, to come it over me! I'm Jack Karbun of the "K. C." ranch, an' I'm my own boss, an' I ain't a thief ner no man's slave! If them jumpin'-jacks, o' yourn, what dances whenever you sneeze, lays their hands on me, they'll wish they hadn't!"

His violent rage seemed to communicate itself to General Armiston, who was usually able to control his temper.

"Iron him!" he ordered, his eyes blazing excitedly. "Iron the scoundrel!"

The words had no sooner left his lips than Jack Karbun, maddened beyond measure, dealt General Armiston a stinging blow.

Under its force, the commander reeled backward into the arms of Daylight; and the prisoner leaping to a chair, hurled himself like a cannon-shot through the window.

The wildest excitement instantly prevailed.

Scarcely had the crash of breaking wood and the jingle of falling glass subsided, when Armiston, recovering himself, shouted:

"After him, men! Don't let him get away! Shoot him down, if necessary!"

The words penetrated beyond the room, and the stunning report of a revolver came as a response.

The soldiers within poured pell-mell through the doorway, and the commander and Doctor Daylight followed them in excited haste.

CHAPTER IV.

A WILD AND NOVEL RACE.

WHETHER right or wrong, Jack Karbun felt at that moment, that, if caught by the soldiers, his life would not be worth an instant's purchase.

He would never have dealt that blow had he not been maddened beyond all bounds. Still, as he raced away, with those loud commands ringing in his ears, he could not wholly regret it; for the stigma that the general thought to put on him by ironing him was such as he could never endure. Never had the manacles of a felon clasped his wrists; and he was resolved that, while life remained, they never should.

He heard the report of the revolver and caught the "ping" of the bullet as it sped by his ear. He expected other shots to follow instantly, and ran like a deer.

It required but a glance to show him he could never escape from the grounds of the fort by ordinary methods, and the sight of the captive gas balloon gave the reckless rancher an idea, which he was quick to put into effect.

He saw the anchoring rope which held it; and, as he ran, he drew from its sheath the big knife which he usually carried for the purpose of cutting mesquite.

He did not turn to glance back, but he heard the quick patter of feet behind him and knew that the soldiers were pressing him closely.

The hated voice of Lieutenant Cutwell rung out from their midst, urging them to renewed effort. Karbun set his teeth hard as he heard it, and took a firmer clasp of the knife.

Only a few bounds were required to bring him to the balloon, and a slashing cut with that keen blade parted the rope. The balloon shot up instantly, with Karbun clinging to the basket and climbing into it as it rose!

It had long been tugging at the anchor rope that held it to the earth, and now ascended like a bird freed from a prison cage, shooting skyward with phenomenal buoyancy.

Instantly there came a fusilade of pistol shots, but they were fired wildly and hastily, and not one of them touched the silken envelope nor the amateur aeronaut.

"Shoot away, there!" Jack Karbun growled, his features relaxing into a grim smile as he began to feel confident of escaping. "I'd like to plug back at you, an' I might, if I had my shootin' irons with me. But I calculate you'll not do much harm with them popguns!"

He knew he was rapidly ascending to a point beyond the reach of their revolvers; and he chuckled as he looked down into the square and beheld the groups of excited

men staring up at him. He felt that he had outwitted them all, and was correspondingly jubilant.

From the multitude he could even distinguish the faces of General Armiston and Lieutenant Cutwell, and their astonished gaze filled him with a degree of suppressed merriment.

"Hyer I am on a v'yage o' discovery wuss'n any ever tuck by Columbus! Where it'll end no man can say. All I know is, I'm bound to strike the ground again somewhere an' some time."

His face sobered at the thought. Ballooning was not a thing he would have chosen as a recreation; and, though there were times when he was exceedingly bold and reckless, now that he began to think of it, he rather recoiled from the results of his hasty venture. The going up had been easy enough, and the coming down might be even more exciting and very much more perilous.

An exclamation of astonishment and alarm broke from his lips, almost as soon as he had completed the sentence.

What he beheld was calculated to fill him with dismay.

Another balloon shot up from the square, swinging quickly beyond the top of the flagstaff, and floating higher and yet higher, as if it meant speedily to overtake him. And the startling thing about it was that it was the rain balloon, laden with "rack-rock," which had also been anchored there.

Although Jack Karbun did not know it, this balloon had been released by Lieutenant Cutwell, who, growing desperate at the escape of the prisoner, had severed the anchor rope and the wire that held it.

There could be no doubt of the object! He hoped that it might explode with wrecking force, and destroy the gas balloon in which Jack Karbun was sailing away!

"Now if I on'y had a rifle I'd be tempted to try my aim on that there!" and the ranchman pursed his lips thoughtfully. "I don't fancy the idee o' that thing a-gittin' too near me. It might go off like a big fire-cracker, an' eternally kerflummix the atmospheric an' blow this hyer sky-traveler into Kingdom Come!"

But Jack Karbun had no rifle with which to stop the progress of the bomb balloon, and so was compelled to watch its rapid ascent, with feelings far from pleasant.

For some reason, whether because it was naturally more buoyant, or because its basket held less weight, it ascended more rapidly than did the gas balloon, and it became quickly apparent to the perturbed ranchman that it was destined to overtake him.

The wind setting westerly, he had already been carried far beyond the fort, and was not directly over the bomb "float." This was hopeful; but he saw that the same current that whirled him on, was sending his odd pursuer along in the same track.

A number of bags of sand lay in the bottom of the basket, placed there for ballast; and when he observed them, he began to heave them over the basket's sides to lighten the weight.

The great gas balloon arose immediately, in response to this, shooting up several hundred feet with a velocity that almost filled him with fear.

He was pleased, though, with the thought that this meant greater safety, believing it would carry him into a current above that in which the bomb-carrier was floating.

As he hurled out one of the bags of ballast near the bottom of the basket, a cry of wondering surprise escaped him.

Fitting beneath the bag as snugly as if in a nest, was a glittering gold object, which, when he had picked it up, he saw to be the missing coffin, which he had been accused of stealing!

How came it there?

His brain reeled under the flood of conflict-

ing thoughts and emotions that poured through it.

He held the coffin in his knotted hand, and closely scrutinized it, noting the queer tracery on the lid and around the edges, with the odd figures of men, beasts, and dragons. He recalled the fact that this was Lieutenant Cutwell's balloon, in which that officer, since the commencement of the rain-making experiments, had been accustomed to make daily ascents for the purpose of studying the condition of the upper atmosphere, to ascertain what effects, if any, the terrific bombardments produced.

Had Lieutenant Cutwell concealed the golden coffin beneath the ballast?

It was too deep a question for sturdy Jack Karbun to enter into at that time. A glance at the pursuing demon that held the "rack-rock" drew him from his cogitations. It was rising higher and still higher, and was already almost into the current in which his own air-ship was upborne.

With a sinking of the heart he recognized the fact that he had been too hasty in hurling out the ballast. Had he allowed it to remain, his balloon would have been in the lower current and the danger of a disastrous collision been infinitely less.

He saw, too, with a thrill of fear, that his balloon was being gained on—slowly, it is true, but sufficiently to bring the two together after a time.

Old Jack Karbun was not given to fits or terror, but the beady sweat came out on his brow as he took in the full perils of his situation.

"Better 'a' had steel bracelets put onto my wrists than to be blowed up by that dad-gasted dynamite! A feller never knows when he's rich till he gets pore. Handcuffs would feel real comfortable jist at this minit, if a feller could wear them with his feet touchin' the ground. I never did hanker after flyin'! 'Druther a heap sight be on the deck o' wild broncho. I could manage to steer it. But you can't change the course o' this thing any more'n you can a prairie fire. It's bound to b'ile right ahead ontel somethin' breaks!"

From his elevated position the ranchman had an extended view of the country in all directions. Mesquite grove and prairie, hills and valleys, lay spread out below him like an unfolded map. Far behind was Fort Mesquite, its excited occupants, who had swarmed out into the open, seeming no larger than ants; and directly ahead lay his own ranch.

He saw that he would pass almost directly over it, and the knowledge came as a comforting sensation. He began to think that his days on earth were numbered, for behind him drove the boom balloon like a runaway horse. It would be a pleasure, if this wild ride was to end his life, to get one last look at his home, and perchance at his girl.

Straining his eyes, he fancied he could see her. It was only a fancy, for the distance was still considerable.

He glanced back at the dreadful, horrible thing that seemed to hang with such dogged persistency at his heels. It was still gaining; creeping up with a slow pertinacity that was more trying on his nerves than would have been a wilder and speedier gain.

As he glanced down at the speeding earth, that seemed reeling under him like a drunken man, a thought came that he proceeded to put into execution.

He would write to his daughter; tell her what had befallen him and of what he stood accused; and drop the note to her with the little coffin!

He tore a page from an entry and account book, that he always carried in one of his pockets, and with its pencil in the loop began to write in feverish haste.

There was no perceptible swaying of the huge air ship, no noticeable rising and fall-

ing, no motion to jar his hand or distract him from his task, and he wrote with furious and almost illegible speed.

He recounted the events of the day, up to the time of penciling the note; then he spoke of the coffin, of how he had found it, and of what he believed concerning it.

Only a few minutes were occupied in the writing, but so swiftly had the two air ships driven along, that when he looked again, he was already over the grounds that hemmed in his lonely ranch-house. These were so extensive, however, that he still had time to twist a cord from one of the remaining bags of ballast, and with it tie the note to the box of gold.

He leaned far over the side of the basket, and strained his eyes, to get a glimpse of Crystal, his daughter!

To his infinite joy, he saw her come out of the ranch-house, presumably drawn by the barking of the dog that had caught sight of the scudding objects in the sky and was baying furiously at them.

He saw her look upward, and then step back as in amazement.

He took off his battered hat and waved it wildly, shouting at the same time, although he was convinced his words could not reach her.

Again and again he swung his hat and whooped!

He could not make out her features, but he knew she was looking straight at him, and trusted she recognized him. At all events, he felt sure she would know everything, when she picked up the coffin he meant to drop, and read the letter he had written.

He waited until the racing balloon was almost above her; then he waved his hat once more, and gave a wild outward fling to the coffin.

He saw it drop downward like a lump of lead; but, just when he was beginning to congratulate himself on the brilliancy of the performance, a counter current, whirling upward, caught the paper, tore it loose, and bore it away into space!

And the golden coffin fell to the earth, unaccompanied by a word of explanation!

Before he could recover himself, the balloon had swept over and beyond the ranch-house, and it was too late to attempt to rectify the matter.

Like a meteor the coffin had dropped out of the sky, and like a meteor it could bring scant knowledge of itself.

CHAPTER V.

A HINT OF MYSTERY.

THE astonishment of Crystal Karbun was beyond expression, when she hurried out of the ranch-house, in answer to the baying of Shep, and saw those two balloons speeding toward her along the highway of the sky.

Her common sense told her they were from Fort Mesquite; but for all that, the fact of their being there was just as incomprehensible.

As she stared and wondered, she beheld a man leaning from the basket of the foremost. He seemed to be frantically waving something, though she could not tell what it was, nor could she recognize him.

She never dreamed that it was her father, who was so mysteriously missing from the ranch-house. Her heart was filled with a deathly pain because of his unexplained absence, which even her present surprise could not drive away.

The waving figure in the balloon seemed no bigger than a toy man.

Unable to guess what his motions meant she carefully scanned the balloon that followed him and was more puzzled than ever. Though she had heard the explosions of the rain balloons she had never seen one, and therefore did not recognize the deadly character of this singular and demon-like pursuer.

Like a pair of birds, or twin thistle-downs sailing before the wind, they came swiftly on.

She observed the frantic wavings of the lone voyager in the foremost, but she heard not a word of his calls.

Then she saw something bright flash high up in the sunlight.

A little later it flashed again. Then a whizzing object seemed to drop out of the sky and half bury itself only a few yards away.

She ran to the spot where she had seen it fall, and with her fingers dug it out of its bed. When she saw what it was, her surprise was even greater than when she had discovered the balloons.

What did it all mean? she asked herself.

For answer she looked again at the sky and at the twin balloons sailing away toward the western horizon. No explanation could come from them; and she turned again to the odd box of gold, scraping away the earth which adhered to its edges, and examining it.

The scrutiny left her as much in the dark as before. She took it up, again looked it over, as if she feared she had missed something of its details, gave a last glance at the receding balloons, and walked thoughtfully with it toward the house.

Carrying it within, she placed it on a table, and endeavored to find some spring or hinge that would open it and reveal its interior, for she was convinced it was hollow.

When she could not do this she set it down again and went out to look at the sky. A cloud had floated across its face, and the balloons, hidden behind it, were no longer visible.

A feeling that was tinged with awe and superstition, took possession of her. Of all her strange experiences, this was decidedly the strangest. It seemed absolutely unexplainable. It was apparently a riddle without a key.

It had been a day of surprises; and this, coming so swiftly on the heels of that other which she could not comprehend, the disappearance of her father, sent an indefinable chill through her veins.

She stared at the monsters depicted on the gold lid of the box, in a sort of spellbound fascination. Their eyes seemed to look into hers with a baleful glitter. The engraved lines were equally perplexing, and as darkly uncertain as the answers of a sphinx.

She knitted her brows in thought, as she tried again and again to find some meaning, some hint of word or letter, in these markings; but she might as well have essayed to decipher the hieroglyphs on a Chinese tea-chest.

Finally a light flashed into her perplexed face. She studied the gold coffin closely; then slowly and almost superstitiously drew up the sleeve of her dress, displaying the white, rounded outline of her right arm.

On its satiny surface, near the shoulder, was the branded figure of a coffin—a brown, horribly-suggestive shape against the marble-like skin!

Until that moment she had not connected this brand with the gold box that had dropped so strangely to her out of the sky. *Was there any relationship between them?*

She had never understood the meaning of that coffin brand, and whenever she had questioned her father concerning it, he had answered, as she fancied evasively, that it was merely a birthmark.

She carefully examined it now to detect any possible resemblance that it might bear to the golden box before her on the table. There was little enough, surely. Each had the well-known coffin shape. Aside from this, there was nothing in either to suggest the other. She would never have thought of the two in the same connection, but for the queer circumstances of the present moment.

"A pair of coffins aren't pleasant things!"

she mused. "One ought to be enough! I wish I knew more of the history of this."

She drew down her sleeve, as she spoke, and again turned her gaze on the gold box.

"What did the balloonist mean by dropping it down to me? Did he intend me to have it? And why *me*? It couldn't have been—"

She blushed a little under the thought that had come to her.

"No; he has had nothing to do with the balloon experiments at the fort. The balloonist must have been one of the officers. I declare, I can't understand it at all. I haven't any more ideas on the subject than Jupiter would have."

She picked it up with a motion of impatience, and returned to the grass-plot in front of the door, from whence she had last seen the speeding balloons.

They had entirely vanished.

"I wish I could make out the meaning of this!" she muttered, going nervously back into the house. "But I mustn't let it take up my time in this way. I think I'd better get Jupiter and ride over to the fort, as I meant to do. Likely I can get a explanation there. There they will know something about the balloons, and perhaps they can tell me what I want to know about father!"

Her anxieties concerning his strange disappearance were returning in full force. They had been partially held in check for a time.

"That coffin! That coffin!" she exclaimed, her thoughts recurring to the puzzle. "What does it mean? And the one on my arm? How did it get there? I'm sure it's not a birth-mark!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE FATE OF THE AIR-SHIPS.

WITH an anguish that was unutterable, Jack Karbun saw his letter whipped away by the wind, and watched it drift on and on out into the airy spaces of the sky. He knew that it would never be found by Crystal, and he blamed himself for not fastening it more securely.

"I guess I hain't got any more sense than the law allows, anyway! Seems to me I've got into the worst snarl of my life. The chances look about ten to one as if I wouldn't git out of it alive! And then, that coffin; and me a-chuckin' it at her in that way! I reckon I have made a mighty bad matter a sight wuss!"

But he was not given much time to reflect on these things. Under the influence of that westward-setting breeze, the balloons were flying through space like runaway horses.

They were nearer together now; and the ranchman saw that a collision must sooner or later occur, if he could do nothing to prevent it.

He turned to the few small bags of ballast still remaining in the basket and heaved them out. The balloon arose a few feet under this lightening of its load; but did not rise high enough to bring a sense of security to Jack Karbun. He saw that the top of the whirling envelope of the bomb balloon was about on a level with the basket in which he was clinging. If the chasing balloon came straight on, this envelope would become entangled shortly with the basket; and what the result might be he feared to contemplate.

The freshening breeze had given a gyratory motion to both balloons; and each was slowly whirling round and round like a lazy top, or a big bumblebee overlaid with honey and sick with sweets.

There was nothing more to throw out, and Jack Karbun watched the slow approach of the "rack-rock" terror with spell-bound fascination. He could scarcely draw his eyes away from it. Inch by inch it lessened the space between itself and the gas balloon. Inch by inch it crept up, with what seemed

a tigerish ferocity, and as if determined to seize its enemy and drag it to death in a whirlwind of fire and ruin.

If Jack Karbun had been a seaman, or had the perceptions of a seaman, he would have been compelled to liken this stern and long chase to a merchantman endeavoring to escape from a swift-sailing clipper with piratical tendencies.

But being a ranchman, he likened it to a cow-pony chasing a steer; and never yet had he seen a steer that was ultimately successful in such a chase.

He glued his eyes to that whirling envelope, and a fear as chilling as death came over him; and when at last, by a strong effort of will, he drew his gaze away, he was startled into a quickening terror by the knowledge that the balloons were rapidly driving into a range of rocky hills.

If they should strike at any point in those hills nothing could save him. The dynamite balloons would be exploded, and he and the balloon that upheld him would be utterly annihilated. It required no special reasoning to show him that.

Every moment the hills loomed higher and higher, and he saw but a short time would elapse until the balloons would be in their midst and grazing their granite slopes.

The fear and terror that had possessed him gave way to a wild desperation.

He looked again at the bomb balloon. Not over three yards now separated the top of its envelope from the basket in which he crouched.

This was speedily reduced to two yards. Inch by inch it came on, until only one yard intervened. He felt as if he could reach out his hand and take hold of the swaying thing. His frame shook with the excess of his emotions; but he nerved himself for the act he had determined on.

He drew out his knife, the one with which he had slashed in two the anchor rope. Then, holding on tightly with his left hand, he reached out with his right, and struck desperately with the knife.

But the bobbing, terrible thing seemed as elusive as an eel. Once the knife-point seemed to touch it, but slipped off the strong meshes without effecting an entrance. Then he struck again and again, but the dipping, swaying motion baffled him.

Whenever he gave one of those vicious cuts with the knife, he closed his eyes in horrible anticipation. He was not acquainted with the construction of balloons, and less with the make-up of these exploding demons. He was not at all sure that the knife-point might not take hold of some spring, or scratch some fiery preparation, that would bring on the dreaded explosion; but he struck, nevertheless, firmly and savagely.

The envelope of the terrible thing passed just beneath his basket, almost scraping it; and once he succeeded in planting the knife blade fairly against it. But it sprang inward under the force of the blow, and no rent resulted.

Then it passed on, seeming to shake itself free, and floated now just in front of him, but out of reach of his hand.

"It's no use!" he gasped, the old fear paralyzing him. "The cards is a-runnin' ag'in' me to-day. It's no use!"

Just before were the approaching, rocky hills, seeming to rise out of the whirling plain like hungry, pointed teeth.

Strong and courageous as he was, Jack Karbun sunk down almost as weak as a child, and covered his face with his hands to shut out the suggestive sight.

He could have fought cattle thieves and rustlers without a thought of fear; could have held at bay a band of Indians thirsting for his blood; but these new and untried forces and foes banished his bravery and filled him with an unreasoning despair.

When he drew away his hands, he saw that

the bomb balloon was increasing its distance, though the discovery did not materially reassure him. It would have brought a feeling of relief, if those hills had not stood there as if beckoning him on to death.

But a new hope sprung in his breast, even as he looked. He saw that the bomb balloon was slowly sinking earthward. The descent was not yet great, but it promised to be considerable by the time the hills were gained.

"I'm afeared it won't make much difference, though," he mused, striving to weigh the chances. "When that there thing does go off, it'll so eternally rack the sky that the stars will 'most fall down. I reckon whether I'm one yard from it or a hundred won't count. It'll teetotally tear this thing into carpet-rags; an' I 'low if I'm lucky enough to strike terry firmy, there won't be enough of me left to hold an inquest over!"

Still, his hopes grew, as the distance between the balloons continued to increase.

He had not given any thought to the means of his descent, so occupied had he been with the terrors growing out of the nearness of the "rack-rock" monster that had for so long chased him.

Now he began to think of that, as the hills approached, and some of the lower and outer ones swept beneath him.

He knew that he was more than forty miles from home; but so speedily had he come, that it seemed only a few moments since he had seen Crystal at the ranch-house, and had hurled to her the golden coffin.

A glance off to one side showed him a bunch of his ranch horses grazing in a grassy canyon. Then they were hidden by an intervening crest; and he swept on.

A gusty wind seemed to blow from the direction of the canyon, which caught the foremost balloon, already dipping and swaying because of its collapsing envelope, and swept it earthward at frightful speed.

Jack Karbun clung in renewed terror to the ropes, as he saw this.

He anticipated an explosion; and it was not long in coming.

The bomb-bearer swung near an arching ledge, against which it struck.

Immediately the dull roar of the rending "rack-rock" bellowed across the ravines; the air became first tremulous, then convulsed; and what seemed a cyclonic gale struck the balloon that held Jack Karbun. The basket crashed upward against the envelope, which appeared suddenly to invert itself, and then all shot downward in a confused and tangled mass!

Karbun clung with the blind instinct of self-preservation, scarcely knowing what he did or what had occurred. He felt himself dropping blindly through space, and believed that the hour of death had come.

But, Jack Karbun was not to be dashed to pieces on that rocky slope. The balloon slowly righted, and the basket again hung, swaying and bobbing, in its accustomed place.

From the envelope there came the loud, hissing sound of escaping gas; and, looking upward, Karbun saw that a rent had been torn in the great silk bag. But, it was not large enough to cause the balloon to fall immediately. It swung round and round like a crippled bird, and descended with a rocking motion in the direction of the point that had been so torn by the explosion of the "rack-rock."

Hope returned once more to the breast of the ranchman, from whence it had so often fled that day.

A little later the balloon dropped gracefully on the apex of a stony knoll; and then the huge envelope careened, collapsed, and that was its end; it lay flattened on the knoll. The basket had been dragged but a short distance; and old Jack, scrambling out, with only a few bruises to show and no broken bones, thanked his lucky stars that his feet were again pressing the fixed and solid earth.

CHAPTER VII.

A RANCHMAN'S INGENUITY.

WITH a feeling of mingled awe and gratitude, he walked to the spot where the "rack-rock" had spent its exploding force.

There was not a shred visible of the balloon that had given him so stern and thrilling a chase. It had been blown into fragments, and these fragments had been so scattered that a close search would scarcely have revealed one of them.

Not only that: The granite of the hillside was plowed and torn in a manner almost beyond description, and a great section of the ledge against which the bomb balloon had struck had been blown down and lay in a pulverized heap at the base of the hill. Such devastation, such a complete work of destruction, Jack Karbun had never seen, and an inward shudder shook him, when he contemplated what would have been his fate if the "rack-rock" had exploded when his balloon was near it.

His anxieties concerning his daughter, who was no doubt worrying over his peril and puzzling her head about the mystery of the coffin that had been thrown to her, would not permit him to long engage in profitless speculation. That he was safe, that he had come through the dangerous race unharmed, was a thing to be grateful for; but it was useless to dwell on it.

The question now, was: how could he return to the ranch?

He recalled the horses he had seen in the canyon. He had many such bands on the range; and he knew they were one and all as wild and unbroken as if they were genuine wild mustangs that had never felt the hand of man. All he had ever done to these, was to have each roped at the proper age and branded on the hip with a big "K C"; a thing not of itself calculated to tame them or make them think kindly of the biped, man.

Nevertheless, Jack Karbun saw that if he would return speedily to the ranch, he must manage in some way to catch one of these horses, and so set his wits to work to devise a feasible plan.

He had neither bridle nor rope; but he saw the raw materials for both in the netting that covered the envelope of the gas balloon.

Alas! that gas balloon. How was it to be got back to the point from which it had flown? Jack Karbun did not know; and at that moment he little cared.

Out of the ropes that formed the netting, he made a halter, and two or three bolases, such as the Indians of certain portions of South America use for the capture of game. He would infinitely have preferred a good lasso, but the material was too much knotted for the purpose; and so he had to content himself with the bolases; each of which consisted of three strong cords, tied together at one end, and with the three free ends weighted each with a bit of stone. It is an uncommon weapon in this country, but nevertheless a very effective one in the hands of a skillful thrower.

Jack Karbun had been taught the bolas trick by a Mexican cowboy, who had once been a cattle-herder in the countries far to the southward of the connecting Panama Isthmus, and he had never forgotten it; but had utilized it on more than one occasion, and had thanked his lucky stars for the happy chance that brought him the knowledge.

With the halter and the carefully-prepared bolases, he walked from the hillside that had come so near witnessing his death; and, after a last backward glance at the wrecked gas balloon and the furrowed hill, he disappeared over the rise, and descended toward the canyon wherein the ponies were feeding.

Jack Karbun had lived too long on the plains, and had passed through too many perils of the sort common to the plains region, not to have become an adept in the art of crawling and creeping. And when the

head of the canyon was gained, and a look told him the ponies were still peacefully feeding in its depths, he got down on his hands and knees and stole forward with all the circumspectness of an Indian trailer.

So softly did he move that not a stone was turned, not a twig of mesquite or chaparral displaced. He passed over the earth, in that recumbent attitude, with the liteness of a panther, and the stillness of a breathless wind.

Down into the canyon's hollow, and along the rocky slope, he pressed, in that slow and laborious fashion, picking up and putting down his hands and feet with a care impossible to the ordinary untrained white man.

If he had been mounted, and had been possessed of a lasso, he would have made a bold dash into the midst of the herd and taken his chances of roping the pony he wanted. Now he knew he must accomplish his purpose by stealth and cunning, if he would accomplish it at all.

Once or twice he peered from a rise, to correct the line of his advance, and to reassure himself that he was proceeding in the proper direction; but as a rule, he kept well out of sight, knowing that these ponies, schooled to the perils of the plains, were likely to be quiet as wary and watchful as a band of antelopes.

Taking advantage of a clump of mesquite which grew quite up to the point where the ponies were grazing, he succeeded in making his way into this; and then crawling, through it with infinite pains, he found himself within casting distance.

There were a half-dozen of the ponies within less than a dozen yards of where he lay; and, peering out from his leafy covert, he fixed his eyes on the one he thought would best answer his purpose.

He did not immediately rush out, however, but lay there quietly until he had partially recovered from the fatigue of his advance.

Then he sprung to his feet, leaping clear of the mesquite at a bound, and, as the ponies turned to race away, frightened at sight of him, he hurled a bolas with all his skill into the midst of the mass of twinkling legs.

One of the ponies went down in a tangled heap, struggling and kicking in vain, its feet tightly knotted together by the strands of the bolas; and before it could kick itself free, old Jack Karbun was at its side, and his woolen jacket was over its head.

The halter, with a compressing slip-noose for the nose, was with difficulty placed in position. Then the blinding jacket was removed; and, as the bewildered pony staggered to its feet, Karbun leaped to its back, exhibiting remarkable ease and lightness for a man of his years.

The fierce struggle that ensued almost baffles description. The captured animal reared and plunged; danced eccentric horn-pipes; and finding those of no avail, threw itself on its back. Not only once did it do this, but a half-dozen times in succession.

Finding it could not rid itself of its tormentor in this way, it bounded from the canyon and headed straight out into the open plains.

This was exactly what the ranchman desired; and by jerking at the halter and pressing with his knees, he managed to shift it in its course until the line of its flight took it directly toward the distant ranch-house.

Mad with terror it flew on mile after mile, exhibiting the remarkable endurance so characteristic of the plains ponies bred after its fashion. They seem absolutely tireless, and are apparently nerved with steel.

Two-thirds of the distance was passed over before any exhaustion became manifest. Then, streaming with sweat and panting like a furnace, its wild spirit conquered and subdued, it fell into a gentle canter, and finally into a walk; and thereafter the ranchman

found no difficulty in guiding it whithersoever he would have it go.

It was after dark when the ranch-house was gained—the end of an eventful day!—and Jack Karbun, riding up to the door, became conscious of the same chill of desertion and absence that had oppressed his daughter on her return that morning from the ride on the ostrich.

No welcome light gleamed from the window. No sound came to greet him. Even Shap, the faithful watch-dog, was silent and evidently gone.

Jack Karbun could not understand it. He swung himself from the back of the pony, tied the animal to a convenient post, and strode up to the door.

No response came to his call; and when he had entered, and had lighted a lamp, he found the house absolutely deserted.

The meaning of it he could not fathom.

CHAPTER VIII.

CRYSTAL KARBUN AT THE FORT.

IN spite of her anxiety over the fate of her father, the mystery clinging about the golden coffin so strongly worked on her fancy, that Crystal Karbun turned to it again; and, placing the coffin on the table, re-examined it, and studied the enigmatical figures on its lid.

So interested did she become in this, that she remained thus engaged for many minutes; and not until a form darkened the door did she come out of the reverie into which she had fallen.

Lieutenant Cutwell stood in the doorway, a look of surprise on his face; and behind him crowded a half-dozen troopers.

A flaming red that might have been construed into an acknowledgment of guilt, burned suddenly in the girl's face.

Cutwell and the troopers saw it, and they saw also the golden coffin resting on the table in front of her.

She arose quickly, invited them within, and marshaled in order a number of chairs for their use.

"Pray be seated, gentlemen," she invited, endeavoring to suppress her agitation.

She was not wholly successful in this; and was half-angered because her cheeks flamed and her heart hammered so furiously.

It must be confessed she had been startled; not only by the coming of Cutwell and the troopers, but because they had caught her poring in that rapt and abstracted fashion over the mysterious markings on the coffin.

She had not attempted to remove or conceal the box of gold; and it remained on the table in full view of all.

In spite of the easy jauntiness of his manner, a feeling of restraint fell on Cutwell, who was the acknowledged spokesman of the party. The lieutenant had called at the ranch-house for the purpose of ascertaining if Jack Karbun had escaped death and returned home.

The last thing he had expected to see was the golden coffin; and his face showed it.

"You—you must excuse me, Miss Karbun, for speaking of it," he began, apologetically, "but that gold box you have there on the table looks to be the very one whose absence from the fort has caused so much trouble. You will pardon me if I venture to ask where you got it?"

She flashed him a look of wonder.

"I'm perfectly willing to answer," and she passed him the coffin for his inspection. "It's a most won—mysterious thing. The most mysterious that ever happened me. Two balloons that I suppose came from Fort Mesquite, passed over here some time ago; and that coffin was dropped from one of them."

The troopers exchanged knowing glances. Her story, remarkable as it was, came as a proof of the things they believed. Jack Karbun, whom they thought guilty of the crime charged against him, had been the

man in the balloon; and, if he had thrown that coffin down to his daughter, what further was necessary to establish the fact that he was the thief? To their minds, nothing. Hence, their significant glances!

Crystal Karbun, studying the features of the young lieutenant, did not notice this exchange of looks; but if she had, she would not have been able to understand it, being so utterly ignorant of all that had gone before.

"You know who was in that balloon?" Cutwell questioned, retaining the coffin in his possession.

"I do not!" she frankly avowed. "He waved at me, or made motions as if to attract my attention; and that queer thing then fell. I presume he tossed it out, through I can't say that I saw the act."

Whatever the troopers believed of Jack Karbun, her innocent ingenuousness told them she knew nothing of the theft, if one had been committed by him.

"I regret to say," Cutwell hesitatingly stammered, "that the man in the balloon was your father: and that he came to be in the balloon because of some trouble occurring at the fort."

She stared at him in disbelief and amazement.

"Impossible!" was the immediate ejaculation.

"I tell you but the truth, Miss Karbun!" and the lieutenant assumed his most impressive tones. "I presume you do not know what preceded his coming to the fort. You did not know of his—of his—"

He stopped again, in the most aggravating way, disliking to form the words; and Crystal Karbun, her fears excited, became wild with impatience.

"What is it you were about to say? Do not spare me; for whatever it is, I would rather hear the worst you have to tell, than to be held in suspense!"

"Well, Miss Karbun, since you insist on it, I will tell you all. Your father was arrested here, in this house, this morning, charged with stealing the identical gold coffin you have given me. And which you frankly acknowledge was dropped to you out of the balloon."

"He was taken to Fort Mesquite by the troopers who effected his arrest; and there, getting into an altercation with the general, about the—the affair, he struck the general a blow, and escaped from the place in the balloon, which was anchored in the drill grounds."

"You have insisted that I should not spare you! That is as much as I know. The man in the balloon, who threw you the coffin, was none other than your father!"

Crystal gave a gasp of surprise and dismay. She was shrewd enough to see how damaging to her father's cause was the confession she had made. She was puzzled, too; if possible more puzzled now than she had been before. What was her father doing with the coffin in his possession, and why should he have dropped it to her out of the balloon? How did he obtain it?

Then came the fear that he might even at that moment be lying dead somewhere, dashed to pieces in the attempt to descend. Altogether it was a horrible picture that framed itself so suddenly before the mental eye of this girl.

"If you will send a body of men to search for my father, who may be lying dead somewhere, I will willingly accompany you to the fort, Lieutenant Cutwell!" she said, her face now as white as it had been red only a few minutes before. "No matter what others may say about him, I know he is not a thief. However that coffin came into his possession, he did not steal it! You may rest assured of that; and that the explanation will be found sooner or later."

"I will go with you, and will appeal to General Armiston to withhold even a mental condemnation till he has all the facts. It

may do no good; but I will go! No; you may retain the coffin! I do not want to see it again."

She said this last, as Cutwell gallantly made a motion to return it to her.

"I am extremely sorry to have so disturbed you!" he apologized. "Extremely sorry indeed. And I beg that you will not give undue weight to what has occurred. As you say, a little investigation may set everything right."

He did not believe this, but felt he ought to say something to lessen the shock of the surprise.

"I shall send the men to make the search, as you request; and I can promise you a loyal escort to the fort, if you choose to go there."

He had arisen, and his shapely hand was now laid politely on the neat blue jacket, just above his heart, not varying an inch from the correct position; for Lieutenant Arthur Cutwell had many times studied this attitude before his dresser in his room at the fort.

Bewildered, confused, heart-crushed as she was, Crystal Karbun felt grateful for this attention; and inwardly thought the lieutenant a gallant and most excellent gentleman.

None of the cowboys had returned, and she disliked to leave the ranch-house without an occupant. She excused herself and withdrew from the room, however, and while the troopers were getting ready for their departure, she took a fruitless survey of the plains.

She was about to go to the stable for her favorite riding-horse, when one of the troopers advanced and politely offered to perform the service for her.

Almost at the same moment Cutwell came up with some of his men; and, thrusting the gold coffin into her hand, insisted that, inasmuch as it had been found in her possession, she should take charge of it and personally surrender it to General Armiston.

The squad detailed to follow in the direction taken by the balloons, for the purpose of finding and assisting Jack Karbun, was already preparing to move away.

Jupiter, the big ostrich, came out of his shed and plainly showed by his actions that he meant to accompany his young mistress; and the shepherd dog evinced the same desire. Both followed in the wake of Cutwell's party and Crystal Karbun, as they rode away toward Fort Mesquite.

One of the very first to greet Crystal, as she passed through the big gates into the parade ground, was Doctor Daylight. His face showed sympathy and wonder; and something much stronger than either, which was love.

He was evidently confused and anxious, as he came forward and asked to be permitted to assist her to alight; and she, consenting, and blushing strangely, seemed equally confused and anxious.

Cutwell had sprung from his saddle and was now also at her side; and accompanied by the two she walked to General Armiston's office.

"This, which came to me so strangely, I have brought to you," she said, placing the gold coffin in his hands, after the formality of an introduction.

General Armiston opened his eyes in wide surprise, and his hands closed on the coffin in an eager clutch.

He held it thus, looking inquiringly from one to another; and Crystal falteringly told her story, assisted now and then by the gallant Cutwell.

"I beg of you, General Armiston to withhold all judgment in this matter until more of the facts are known," she implored. "I am as sure that my father did not steal it as that you did not!"

There was something so earnest and impressive, such an evidence of fond belief in

the innocence of her father, that General Armiston was visibly touched.

"I will endeavor to do so at your request," he said, bowing politely; for General Armiston was ever the gallant gentleman in his treatment of women. "I thank you for bringing it to me. I cannot tell you how highly I value it. It contains jewels of great worth; though not for them alone do I so greatly esteem it. There are few such jewels in this country."

As he made the declaration, he touched the spring, which Crystal had sought for all in vain, and the strangely-wrought lid flew open.

A cry of amazement and anger broke from his lips.

The golden coffin was seen to be empty!

The members of the little party seemed scarcely able to believe their eyes!

"What is the meaning of this?" the general asked, in a hoarse, choked voice.

"I do not know!" Crystal stammered, becoming first white and then red. "The box seems to be just as it was when it came into my hands. I assure you I have not opened it. I tried to, but could not; I could not find the spring!"

She was shaking like a leaf.

"Has it been out of your hands since you have had it?" Daylight questioned, coming to the rescue.

She gave him a grateful look.

"The contents cannot have been taken out since the box came into my possession," was her statement, after a moment's thought. "Lieutenant Cutwell had it a few minutes while we were at the ranch-house, but he gave it back to me almost immediately, insisting that I should deliver it myself to General Armiston."

A gleam of comprehension came into the eyes of Doctor Daylight.

Having gone so far, Crystal proceeded to explain hastily all that had occurred at the ranch-house, and to reveal in quick detail the strange incidents that had placed the box in her care.

Cutwell, though he had heard the story before, appeared to be as much interested as the general, and permitted no word of it to escape him.

What General Armiston thought was plainly apparent, though he did not put it into words. He was more certain than ever that Jack Karbun had stolen the coffin, and had filched from it the jewels before tossing it to his daughter.

That one last act was the only thing mysterious in the entire chain of circumstances. Even the general was puzzled by it, convinced though he was of Karbun's guilt.

Crystal Karbun, weighted by the knowledge that General Armiston believed her father a thief, stood there with downcast eyes, thrilling under the strange degradation and terror. Only the presence of Daylight, whom she felt to be the one friend in the room, sustained her.

The case against her father looked very black. In shaking the box, when she had tried to open it, she had noted the fact that its contents, if there were any, did not rattle about. She saw, though, by looking into the open coffin, which still rested in the general's trembling hand, that it was lined with the softest of satin pads; so it was possible the gems might have given out no sounds even when they were in the box.

"I cannot understand it!" she declared at length, breaking the oppressive silence.

So shaky and unnatural was the voice, that General Armiston forgot for a moment his own deep sense of loss and glanced at the trembling girl. Her ashen pallor and her evident pain startled him.

"Accompany the young lady to the house," he commanded, turning to Cutwell and Daylight. "Present her to Mrs. Armiston and explain that it is my wish she shall be well cared for. Poor child! I have

been selfish in forgetting how this must affect you!"

He closed the box with a snap, and put it in one of his pockets.

"It is useless to longer discuss the mystery. Time alone can solve it. Stay! I will go myself with you to my wife, and place you in her hands. You are very pale and weak, and must be ill!"

He took up his hat, and walked across the parade-grounds with Crystal and the two men; and, knocking at the door of the house occupied by himself and family as a home, he presented Crystal, with a few explanatory words, and left her in the care of the kind-hearted woman who was his wife.

CHAPTER IX.

A THRILLING RIDE, WHICH ENDS IN MORE MYSTERY.

THE kindness of Mrs. Armiston was genuine and of the wholesome sort. She caused Crystal to acquaint her with the details of the startling story, and then soothed her as a mother might soothe a frightened child.

"I shall insist on your making this place your home for awhile!" she declared. "I cannot believe that your father is guilty of any such crime. The father of such a girl is not likely to be the kind to do an act like that. I shall not believe it. And now make yourself as comfortable as you can, and remember all the time that I am your friend."

But, there was one in the house who did not look so kindly on the ranchman's daughter.

This was a Miss Alice Brotherton, a young lady from the East, on a visit to the Armistons, who were family friends. She had given Crystal a sharp look when she beheld her coming across the parade-grounds. The cause of her dislike, we may say, was that she herself had fallen in love with the dashing post-scout, Doctor Daylight, and suddenly was convinced that in the ranchman's beautiful daughter she had a rival!

Crystal paid scant attention to the discourtesies of Miss Brotherton. Her mind was engrossed with more serious things. The startling events of the day clung to her like a nightmare; and, besides, there was the deep anxiety concerning the fate of her father.

When the little detachment that had gone in search of him returned about nine o'clock that night with the report that they had been able to discover nothing, her suspense became simply unendurable. She resolved to make a search herself.

The big ostrich that had followed the party had been given the freedom of the parade ground, and Crystal had seen him stalking disconsolately about, shortly before dark, like a homeless bird of the wilderness. She resolved to take Jupiter and return with him to the ranch-house.

She knew she would be opposed in this resolution, and therefore told no one of her intention, but slipped quietly out, placed a string on Jupiter's neck, and led him to the gate that opened out toward the plains.

A sentinel stood there on duty; but when he saw her he stepped back and politely saluted; for General Armiston had issued orders that her movements were to be placed under no restrictions.

"If any one inquires, you may tell them that I have returned home, but will try to come back to-morrow!" and she passed through the gate, leading the ostrich.

"Very well, miss!" touching his cap.

When she heard the gate close behind her, she gave a low command to Jupiter, at the same time pulling gently on the cord. The well-trained bird obeyed instantly, squatting on the ground like a chicken. Then she climbed easily to her accustomed place on his back, and bade him rise.

He seemed to know that she meant to re-

turn home, for he stepped out lightly in that direction, evidently glad of the freedom of the wide reaches about him.

With encouraging words she sent him spinning on, her anxiety outrunning even his phenomenal speed.

"On, Jupiter!" she urged. "We must reach home just as soon as we can. On! That is a good fellow!"

Thus spoken to, he stretched out his neck and began rapidly to cover the intervening distance with those long, swiftly-moving legs.

But the ride home was not destined to pass without its disagreeable incident.

When about half the way had been passed over, there came to the startled ears of the girl, the long, mournful howl of wolf; which was quickly taken up by another and another, until at last a score of these animals were represented by those long-drawn, blood-curdling notes.

Ordinarily Crystal Karbun was not afraid of wolves. Of the common coyotes she had never had any fear. But she knew from the sounds that these were the large, fierce gray creatures, variously called timber wolves, buffalo wolves, etc., according to the locality in which they are found.

There had been reports of their recent invasion of the country, and the cattlemen were already beginning to suffer from their depredations; and now, as she listened to them, and knew that her presence there was the cause of the outcries, she trembled a little and a chill of fear crept through her.

But she had faith in the running powers of Jupiter, and in the kicking powers, too, of those wonderful legs. Speedy indeed must be the wolf that could overhaul him in a fair race.

"Now show them how you *can* run!" she commanded, at the same time tapping his sides with one of her hands.

And Jupiter, as if comprehending her words, leaped away in a renewed burst of speed.

But those howls continued to float over the wild expanse, coming, as it seemed, from all directions; from front as well as rear.

This caused her to doubt the ability of the big ostrich to escape them. Jupiter was not to be given a fair race. From those behind he had nothing to fear, but what of those in front, and hastening toward him?

Soon the dark outlines of the forms of these could be seen, and their daring audacity made Crystal tremble. They dashed at the ostrich, snapping their distended, foaming jaws, and striving to leap up to where she sat on the bird's back.

Jupiter halted an instant, as if he contemplated fight, and sent the nearest howling over backward with a well directed kick. Then, as if knowing he was unequal to such a contest, he leaped on again, increasing his already great speed.

The howling pack, disconcerted only for an instant, swung in behind him and gave chase, yelping fiendishly.

Crystal Karbun, half-stupefied with fear, yet was able to appreciate the splendid running qualities now exhibited by the bird. She had thought she knew something of Jupiter's capabilities; but she was compelled to confess she had never seen him try his full speed until that moment.

His legs moved with the rapidity of the spokes of a whirling carriage wheel; so swiftly that had there been a spectator on the ground, aided by the full light of day, he could hardly have distinguished one leg from the other. They were blent into a loomy mesh, by the quick, shuttle-like motion.

It was with the utmost difficulty that the girl, half terrorized by this wild spurt, kept her place on the bird's back. The wind whistled by her with a shrill sound, and she felt forced to twine her arms about the ostrich's neck to support herself from falling.

The fastest of the pursuing wolves almost

immediately fell hopelessly to the rear; and, as there were no more of them in front, barring the way, the yells grew fainter and fainter.

"Steady, Jupiter!" Crystal urged, anxious for the welfare of the noble bird. "Don't run yourself to death! You have distanced them beautifully. They'll not be able to get near us again. You're worth a dozen ponies, any time. Steady there, Jupiter!"

The ostrich's fears somewhat abated under these coaxing admonitions, and he fell into a gentler gait; one not so trying on the clinging abilities of his fair rider.

The howls of the chasing wolves had, too, fallen on other ears.

Doctor Daylight, going to the home of General Armiston, shortly after the return of the searching party, for the purpose of saying some word of comfort to the distracted girl, was astonished beyond measure to discover that she was not there.

When she did not respond to the calls of Mrs. Armiston, a search was instituted, which revealed that she had departed from the fort with the ostrich.

"Did she leave no message?" Daylight anxiously inquired of the sentry.

"Yes, sir," was the reply; "she said she was going home, and would be back to-morrow."

It was while these words were being spoken that the quavering, startling, distant cries of the fierce beasts were heard, borne to the fort on the sighing wind.

"Bring my horse at once, will you?" Daylight requested, turning to one of the men whom he knew as a friend. "This girl has got herself into trouble. I am going to her assistance!"

Five minutes later he was mounted, and rode through the gate in the direction taken by Crystal.

Never dreaming of what was taking place at the fort, Crystal Karbun sped rapidly on toward the ranch-house, which she reached in due time.

She felt that if her father were alive he would return there as quickly as possible; and a sense of disappointment smote her when no welcoming light twinkled from the windows.

"He has not come!" she thought. "I am afraid he has been killed!"

She fully understood the nature of the danger to which he had been subjected in that wild balloon race. The fact that she had heard no report, such as she fancied would be made by the explosion of the "rack-rock," had comforted her. A muffled, far-away boom had been heard by some of the soldiers, but she had not been told of it.

There were a thousand perils attending the descent, any one of which might have caused the death or maiming of her father; and now she began to feel that even the worst of her fears must be true.

She dismounted from the ostrich near the corral, and walked heavily toward the house. All desire for haste had forsaken her.

But when near the window she gave a tremulous start. A scuffling sound from within the building reached her. It was followed almost immediately by a fall.

The moon, now shining brightly, poured a flood of light through the window, but she could see nothing. She ran to the door; and, without waiting to knock, pushed it open.

Dashing breathlessly into the room from whence the sounds seemed to have come, she was just in time to see a man dressed as an army officer, stagger through the opposite doorway, weighted with a heavy burden.

She did not get to see the officer's face; but she was sure that the object he bore was the form of a man; and in that moment of excitement she believed this man to be her father.

She gave a loud scream and rushed to the doorway, through which the officer had vanished.

Nothing was to be seen.

A one end of the house a grove of big mesquite trees came close up to the door; and it was evident that the fugitive—if he were a fugitive—had hurried into its shelter.

With another scream, that was heart-rending in its despair, the girl rushed into the grove. But though she searched everywhere, stumbling blindly about and frenziedly wringing her hands, she could discover nothing.

The officer and his limp and apparently inanimate burden had completely disappeared.

A little later she fancied she heard the ringing of hoof-beats on the tough sod beyond the corrals; but when she had dashed in that direction, and had scanned the plains, faintly illumined by the pale light of the moon, there was nothing visible. The ringing hoof-beats, too, had died away.

She rushed far out on the plains in a vain search, returning after a time almost crazed by the weight of her grief and despair. Then she walked again and again through the mesquite growth, scratching her hands and tearing her clothing.

The stables and corrals were also searched. There was nothing anywhere to aid her in unraveling this new mystery. She was sure, though, that the limp form she had seen borne through the doorway was that of her father; and she was almost equally sure that he was dead, and had been slain by the unknown officer.

CHAPTER X.

THE STORY WRITTEN IN THE EARTH.

DOCTOR DAYLIGHT, reaching the ranch-house on an almost exhausted horse, found Crystal Karbun on the verge of hysteria. With difficulty could she make known what she had seen.

Daylight was very much shaken by her incoherent account. He was afraid that bloody work had been done there.

Finding a lantern in the house, he accompanied her in another search of the premises, flashing the light into all the dark recesses that might in any possibility hide a secret in their gloomy depths.

The search revealed many things; many things that Daylight could have wished might be kept from her knowledge. He had tried, indeed, to induce her to remain within doors and permit him to prosecute the search alone; but this was a thing she would not do.

"I want to know the worst!" she had declared. "I will know all! It cannot be any worse to know that father is dead, than to feel the crushing weight of this uncertainty. It is killing me!"

Thus adjured, Daylight perforce allowed her to accompany him.

His great love for her, plainly apparent in all he said and did, made him wish he might take her in his strong arms and soothe her as he would have soothed a little child. His words of consolation seemed feeble and cold; they appeared to him to lack fervor and warmth.

Yet, it was plain, even to his love-intoxicated senses, that his coming had been hailed as a blessing by the sorely-trying girl. She had leaped up eagerly at the sound of his voice and had greeted him with words of delirious joy. She had clasped his hands feverishly and nervously and clung to him as if he were her only friend. He ought to have been satisfied with that; and would have been, had he not reflected that she probably would have treated any other friend in the same way at that time and under those circumstances.

Often in that search did he find it difficult to restrain the words that leaped up for utterance and crowded chokingly to his lips.

It was not long, after the mesquite grove had been entered by them, until he came on signs that were significant, and, to his schooled eyes, almost as plain as written words.

In the soil near the corner of the house, which had been rendered wet and soft by water led there from a waste pipe, were the clearly-defined imprints of a pair of cavalry boots, that were of small size and fine finish.

The boots had had high heels, as was shown by the depth to which they had penetrated.

"You were not mistaken, you see, in thinking the man a soldier and an officer. None but an officer would have worn boots of that shape and make."

Other boot-marks were found further on beneath the mesquite-trees; and again in the dust around the corrals. All tallied with those first seen at the corner of the house.

The wearer of the boots had been hurrying on at considerable speed, too, as evidenced by the way in which the toes cut into the dust.

At one point, where the prints were full and broadly perfect, Daylight took a small tape measure from his pocket and applied it to the outlines, noting carefully the measurements.

"The fellow wore a number seven boot!" he affirmed, rising from the task; "and it was a boot that was nearly if not quite new. You have the evenness of the heels, and the clear-cut impression they make. The boots would not make such an impression, if they had been much worn."

He said this aloud.

His added thought, was:

"That fellow must have been from Fort Mesquite;—could have been from no other place! I shall find out who it is there wears a brand new No seven cavalry boot. I half think I could already give a shrewd guess!"

Beyond the corral, at the place from whence the patter of hoofs had seemed to come, they came on the tracks of a horse that plainly could not have been one of the ranch horses.

Daylight followed it some distance out on the prairie, noting every peculiarity.

What he discerned was this:

The horse was double-burdened, as was shown by the way the hoofs had cut into the sod. It was a large cavalry horse, not a ranch pony, as was proven by the size of the hoof-prints. It was also a shod horse; and very few, if any of the ranch ponies, had ever had shoes on their feet.

There was even more to be learned of this story written in the earth: The "cork," as it is called, was absent from the right front shoe; and the left hind shoe had a peculiar saw-like shape on its outer edge, where it had been hammered roughly by the smith who had set the shoe. This "saw edge" was plainly apparent, whenever the shoe was set down in a compact dust-heap. There were many of these in the neighborhood of the corral; and, as yet undisturbed by the wind, they held the impression of the shoe with almost the fidelity of wax.

Returning to the house, Daylight made a further discovery, which he did not dare to communicate to Crystal.

At one side of the room there was a very perceptible blood-stain. He wondered how she could have missed seeing it; and to keep her from seeing it now, he purposely pushed a chair to that side of the room, so placing it that the stain was concealed by its shadow.

"If you are not afraid to stay here a little while?" and he looked questioningly at her.

"What is it?" she asked.

Upheld and sustained by the strength of his presence, she was regaining her normal mental state. She had in a measure recovered from the physical shock, and her nerves had ceased to quiver in that disagreeable and frightening way.

"If you are willing to remain here awhile—only a few minutes—I will ride out on the prairie beyond the corrals and see if there is anything further to be learned there!"

"Why cannot I go with you? I am not afraid to stay; but I prefer to see whatever you see."

He could not tell his reasons for making the request. He half-expected he would find the dead body of Jack Karbun somewhere out there under the glistening moonlight.

"I'd rather make the search alone," he answered.

A look of comprehension came into her face.

"Very well!" she replied, with sad weariness.

She had already lighted the lamp; and sat down by the table on which it rested, as she saw him walk out into the semi-gloom.

It was a long half-hour before he returned; but when he did come back, she saw that he had found nothing—had seen nothing.

"It's no use looking further to-night!" he declared, setting down the lantern. "I'll come back again in the morning and make as thorough a hunt as any man possibly can. And I'll find some of those cowboys and place them in charge here until you choose to come again, or until some trace of your father has been found."

"Now, I think we'd better start for the fort."

She got up resignedly, suffering him to command her actions as he would. Only on one point did she express a preference.

"I shall ride the ostrich!" she said. "I came away from the fort on his back, and prefer to return that way."

"Very well!" was the reply.

And in that odd fashion they rode away together across the shimmering plains toward Fort Mesquite.

CHAPTER XI.

DAYLIGHT'S DETECTIVE WORK.

DAYLIGHT did not think of sleep, that night, after his return to the fort. He had work to do. For one thing, he desired to make a special study of the movements of Lieutenant Arthur Cutwell.

One of his first acts was to ascertain if Cutwell was in the fort; and if so if he had been absent at any time during the night.

For this purpose he visited the sentry on guard at the gate.

Cutwell had been away for several hours, the sentry informed him, but had returned some time before.

"Did Lieutenant Cutwell go out on horseback or on foot?" Daylight questioned.

"On horseback."

"Do you know what horse he rode?"

"His own horse; the one with the white fetlocks and a heavy black mane."

Doctor Daylight was well satisfied with the result of his queries. He had seen the horse frequently; and he believed an examination of its shoes would reveal the peculiar markings seen in the dust-heaps near the corral. He resolved to have a look at it at the first opportunity.

Doctor Daylight, as he had universally come to be known, had visited the fort on a special mission; and the events of the day just passed and the proofs connected therewith, were leading him along a trail that seemed destined to bring him into the one he had already been following.

As a special detective, whose work lay among army posts and military commands, he had been sent to Fort Mesquite, by the general in charge of that department, to ferret out a case of mysterious stealing.

A considerable sum of money had strangely vanished from the possession of the paymaster stationed there, and no clue to its whereabouts or the manner of its disappearance could be found. Absolutely no one was

suspected; it could not be positively stated even, that a theft had been committed. The money might have been lost.

These were all the facts known, when Daylight was summoned to Fort Mesquite to look into the matter.

He did not come there avowedly as a detective. That might have been to defeat the very object of his mission. It was said that he had been detailed to make investigations concerning the threatened trouble among the cattlemen, and to do certain other work in that line.

He had commenced on his task in earnest, almost as soon as he set foot in the fort; and the result of his work so far indicated pretty clearly that Lieutenant Cutwell was the thief.

On top of the evidence laboriously collected, came the events, and incidents, and the proofs of the day so lately ended; and all these pointed likewise to Cutwell as the guilty man.

Daylight hastily ran over the facts that were known to him.

A golden coffin containing jewels had been missed from General Armiston's room. Cutwell, who had frequent access to that room and probably knew of the existence and presence there of that old jewel case, had accused Jack Karbun of stealing it and caused his arrest.

That was fact number one.

Jack Karbun having escaped in Cutwell's balloon, had tossed the coffin in question out of the balloon to his daughter Crystal. It had been found in her possession, and had been confided by her for a few moments to Cutwell. When she returned it to the general, the jewels which it had contained were gone.

That was fact number two.

Crystal Karbun, anxious about her father, had ridden to the ranch-house that night. No light was to be seen; and when she had opened the door, a man dressed in officer's clothes had staggered out of the opposite door bearing a limp form. The footprints and the hoof-marks, indicated to the mind of the detective that that officer had been Arthur Cutwell.

That was fact number three.

Here was a chain of circumstantial evidence reasonably complete; and these are the conclusions which the army-post detective drew from it.

Lieutenant Cutwell had stolen the jewel-case from the general's room, and had accused Karbun, who chanced to be in the room at a time to draw suspicion toward him; and he had done this that no one might think of him as the thief. Cutwell had placed the jewel-case in the balloon, and that was how Jack Karbun came to have it in his possession. Why the ranchman had tossed it to his daughter, Daylight was not yet prepared to say.

Cutwell had abstracted the jewels, when the case had been given him by Crystal; and afterward, fearing that Jack Karbun was still alive and would, by his account of where he got the jewel-case, turn suspicion in the right direction, he had ridden to the ranchman's home, and, finding him there, had murdered him to seal his lips.

In placing the jewel-case in the balloon, Cutwell had probably thought to loose the balloon from the tethering rope, while it was high in air; which he could probably have attributed to an accident. Then, when borne far away, he could have concealed the coffin and its jewels, to be recovered at some convenient time, and no one would ever have dreamed of the trick thus played.

It was all so plain to the army post detective, that he smiled at the idea that there could be any other reasonable theory, or that any one would think of Jack Karbun as the thief.

Having reached these conclusions, Daylight posted himself at a point in the parade-

grounds where he could command a good view of Cutwell's room.

He believed that more evidence would be forthcoming that night; and he was not to be doomed to disappointment.

He had not stood in that shadowy angle many minutes when he saw a figure steal away from the lieutenant's apartment and hurry toward the horse-stables.

Daylight was sure it was Cutwell; and he followed in the same stealthy manner, keeping himself well out of sight.

He beheld the man enter one of the stalls in a creeping posture, and then stoop down as if digging in the new straw-bedding that covered the earthen floor. He even fancied he saw a dull gleam, as if a knife or some similar instrument were being wielded.

By the exercise of some ingenuity and much caution he contrived to crawl to within a few feet of the stooping figure. Then he became satisfied that the man was Cutwell and that he was excavating a hole of considerable size in the hard floor of the stall.

The detective's curiosity increased greatly. He knew he was on the verge of an important discovery.

Lieutenant Cutwell—for it was he—all unaware that he was being so closely watched, continued silently and energetically at his work. With a large, keen-pointed hunting knife he loosened the hard soil, and drew it out with his hands, sinking and widening the hole until it finally resembled a miniature grave.

There was a horse in the wide stall. This horse he had crowded to one side; and now, with turned head and staring eyes, it gazed at him in mute and wondering surprise.

Cutwell paid no heed to the horse, but stabbed furiously at the soil until the cavity was large enough to answer his purpose.

Then he took up a bundle, lying by his side, deposited it in the hole, and carefully drew the displaced soil on top of it, covering all with the loose hay and bedding; after which he arose and tramped the place with his feet until it had resumed its natural appearance.

He had accomplished his task, and now stole back to his quarters well satisfied.

But he was no sooner out of sight than the army-post detective crept into the stall with the same caution, and proceeded to resurrect what Cutwell had there buried.

He drew the object out at length and unfolded it, with a sigh of relief. It was an officer's coat.

Having refilled the hole and arranged the bedding just as Cutwell had left it, Daylight tucked the coat under his arm and went straight to his own room.

There, by the light of a dimly-burning lamp, he examined the coat. It was one Cutwell had worn that day, and there were unmistakable blood-stains on it.

Daylight knew as well as if he had been told it all, that Cutwell had found it impossible to safely burn or otherwise destroy the garment, and so had felt compelled to bury it, selecting the stall as the best place for his purpose.

"This furnishes a bit of evidence worth having!" and smiling serenely Daylight deposited the coat in his trunk. "I think the time is not far when this will be of service."

CHAPTER XII.

THE MYSTERIOUS RIFLEMAN.

IN accordance with his promise, Daylight, after seeing Crystal Karbun the next morning, rode away toward the lonely ranch-house.

He was feeling easier after that interview with Crystal. Her words and manner had shown him that she was bearing up well under her troubles; that she was a girl of spirit and fortitude who was not likely to give way to a preying grief.

The ranch-house was his first objective

point; and when he had reached it he was pleased to observe that it was not deserted, as on the previous day. Jack Karbun had not returned, but two of the cowboys were there. They had been absent with a branding outfit, and knew absolutely nothing of what had taken place.

Daylight made it his duty to acquaint them with many of the facts, and then gave them the commands he had received from Crystal.

"One of you must stay here and look after the stock and keep the house in readiness for the return of Mr. Karbun, should he chance to come back. I should like to have the other accompany me in the search I intend to make."

The oldest of the cowboys said he would remain on the place.

Both were immensely astonished on hearing Daylight's story. They were not only astonished; they were indignant that Jack Karbun should have been thought a thief. They had worked many months for Karbun and knew him to be an honest man.

"Aside from an accident, can you think of anything that would detain Karbun and prevent him from coming home?" the detective questioned, having said nothing to them of his belief in Karbun's death.

Before advancing a theory of his own, he was anxious to ascertain if there were any facts that might bear against it.

"There's jist one thing," said the oldest cowboy, after a moment's thought. "You kin take it for what it's wuth. You've heered about this here cattle trouble?"

Daylight nodded assent.

"There was purty big signs of a muss brewin' yisterday; an' there's a chance that Jack's got mixed up in it, fer some o' the men don't like 'im a little bit. That might keep 'im frum gittin' back on time, though I don't 'low it'd be apt to hold 'im fer long, 'specially after what you say has happened. He'd know 'at his gal was in a peck o' trouble, and he'd break a halter 'fore he'd stay away long, under them circum-stances!"

What the cowboy said did not in the least change Daylight's opinions on the subject. It might have done so, if he had not seen and handled that bloody coat. He knew Jack Karbun was dead; and was now anxious to begin a search for the body.

When that had been found, he proposed to arrest Arthur Cutwell without further delay.

He realized that this act would tell heavily on the general, who had shown the most implicit confidence in the young lieutenant. Cutwell was distantly related to General Armiston, and it was said Armiston had been instrumental in securing his appointment to West Point.

However that might be, the detective did not mean to spare Cutwell. He thought highly of the general, but would not shield the general's relative. It was even the more his duty, he thought, to expose the dishonesty and the pretensions of Cutwell because of the confidence that Armiston had in the young rascal.

So thinking, Daylight rode away with the cowboy who had volunteered to accompany him.

When beyond the corrals and at the point where the tracks of the big army horse were to be looked for, he confided his belief in Jack Karbun's death to this cowboy; and together they commenced the work of trailing the horse across the grass.

They found it easy work for a time, but there came a limit to its successful prosecution. The soil became hard and compact, and finally a series of rocky slopes were gained where trailing could not be done.

They rode around this—though its extent was vast—hoping to strike the tracks of the big horse on the other side; but they could not find the trail again, though they spent several hours in the search.

Finally, when they felt forced to give it up, they beat every gulch and canyon in the rocky district; explored every ravine and draw; thinking that by a chance they might come on Karbun's body, cast away there.

But all their efforts proved unavailing.

There were now two other lines of investigation to be pursued.

To ride in the westerly direction taken by the balloons, and seek for information in that section; and to make inquiries among the factions of cattlemen.

The remainder of the day was spent in the first; which proved in the end a mere waste of time. They lost the true course; and, though they struck the rocky hills that had witnessed disaster to the balloons, it was at a point too far south to yield any information.

On his weary return toward the fort that night, Daylight still clung to his first idea; having seen nothing so far to induce him to change. That was, that Karbun had been killed by Cutwell. The fact that the body had not been found did not at all invalidate the conclusion.

The cowboy kept on to the ranch-house when he had parted from Daylight; and had agreed to make the necessary inquiries of the warring cattlemen as soon as it could be done.

Daylight did not gain the vicinity of the fort until nearly noon of the next day, for the spent condition of his horse forced him to pass the night on the open prairie, with no other shelter than his blanket.

When he approached the post, and while yet a mile or two from it, he became aware that a body of troopers was beating the mesquite at that point, as if they hoped to rout some wild beast from its lair.

The detective spurred up his horse, and was soon near enough to make inquiries.

What he then learned filled him with anxious questions and doubts.

A number of troopers had been shot at that morning from various points of ambush, and the mysterious rifleman was believed to have taken refuge in that vast grove of mesquite.

Its extent furnished ample opportunities for concealment. It reached over many leagues; and about its borders there were some craggy points and high, rocky knolls. A better hiding-place could scarcely have been found in the region.

Lieutenant Cutwell was in command of the searching party, and was evidently considerably annoyed, not to say frightened. One of the bullets had been aimed at him, and gone through his coat.

A trooper had had his horse wounded, and another had received a ball through his hat.

The entire causelessness of the shooting was what most unnerved the men; this, combined with its mysterious character and the deadly accuracy of the rifleman's aim.

All of the shots had been fired from great distances; and the closeness with which they had come to the targets was demoralizing in the extreme. No man could say he might not be the recipient of the next favor and feel the bullet from the concealed rifle bite through his flesh.

Nevertheless, they went about the search bravely and systematically, and prosecuted it with vigor, in spite of their fears.

Such a bushwhacker, they felt, must be routed at all hazards, or not a man at the post could feel that his life was his own for a moment, when he ventured abroad.

Daylight joined in the man-hunt, and honestly endeavored to discover the lurking, would-be assassin.

But their best efforts were all in vain. Though they plowed through the mesquite in all directions, and ventured into every discoverable recess, the rifleman could not be found. He had vanished as singularly as if the earth had swallowed him.

But, as they were riding away, and when not more than fifty yards from the outskirts

of the grove, there came again the "spang" of that hidden rifle.

Cutwell's horse, the one Daylight believed he had vainly trailed, reared, and fell dead with a bullet in its brain.

A wreath of white powder smoke was seen to hover for an instant about the top of a high crag, distant about two hundred yards; then the wind caught and whirled it away.

Instantly, the troopers wheeled about and raced toward the spot whence that smoke had curled. But on reaching it, nothing was discoverable. The rifleman had slipped away through the trees, or had crawled into some hole, and could not be found.

It was an incomprehensible enigma.

"I wonder if that can be Jack Karbun?" Daylight asked himself, as he rode thoughtfully toward the fort with the troopers. "Who else is there that would be likely to have a grudge against the men here? No one!"

There were a hundred speculations as to the cause of the shooting, none of them satisfactory to Daylight.

There was one thing, though, that Daylight did learn:

He saw that the shoes on the dead horse corresponded exactly with the prints in the dust-heaps near Jack Karbun's corrals.

That was a point worth settling!

CHAPTER XIII.

DAYLIGHT AS A LOVER.

DAYLIGHT, the detective, coming on Crystal Karbun, in the shadow of a tree near the general's home, was touched as he had hardly been since coming to Fort Mesquite. A great wave of commiseration and love swept over him.

He walked softly up behind her, and lowly addressed her, fearing to startle her.

What distressed him was that he saw she had been, and still was, crying bitterly.

The lack of knowledge concerning the fate of her father, and the growing certainty in her mind that he was dead, had given her no rest or peace.

In addition, her stay at the fort had not been pleasant, in spite of the kindness of Mrs. Armiston. The cruel, cutting words occasionally uttered by Miss Brotherton; the innuendoes that stabbed more mercilessly than sword-points, the acts and attitudes that that young woman had employed to wound and humiliate the girl she felt to be her rival, had been many.

They hurt Crystal Karbun almost beyond endurance; and one final, cruel stab that day was what had sent her crying to her present position beneath the concealing shadows of the tree.

Though the sun was still touching the grassy rim of the horizon, giving a last peep over the plains before bowing from sight for the night, the shadows of night had already invaded the parade grounds and the buildings that constituted Fort Mesquite.

This growing darkness she had sought to shield her from the enemy who would be only too pleased, she fancied, to see her tears.

As a refinement of cruelty, Miss Brotherton had made a covert and sneering allusion to the airs which the daughters of thieves sometimes assumed; and had accompanied the allusion by so direct a look that Crystal could not be left in doubt as to her meaning.

Notwithstanding her great desire to escape from the presence of this unamiable young woman, Crystal would not have sought that secluded spot had she fancied that Daylight might seek her there.

Therefore, she was astonished beyond measure, when she heard his low-spoken words.

"You have been crying," he said.

She could not but notice the strange tenderness in his tones.

"And ought to be ashamed of myself for it!"

She got up hastily, her face aflame.

She turned toward the house, and he put out a hand as if to stay her; but he as quickly drew it back.

"Yes; it is best for you to go in. Permit me to accompany you."

She dashed away her tears and tried to laugh, but failed miserably in the latter.

"It is not womanly to cry," she apologized. "But, oh! Mr. Daylight, you don't know how I have been tried here!"

"It is not strange. You have had trouble enough, in all conscience!"

"It is not wholly that," she corrected.

When he pressed her for further explanations, she evaded an answer; and, thinking he could afford to wait for it, he walked on quietly with her into the house.

He had been afraid she would not extend the invitation to enter; but Daylight, shrewd as he was in many things, and unsurpassable as he was in the line of work to which he had given so much study, was not an adept in affairs of the heart; and, in a case where he was himself concerned, was as hopelessly ignorant as a prattling babe.

The agreeable knowledge that the great quiet sitting-room was unoccupied, pressed itself on Daylight's attention, as they stepped into it. If now he could but "screw his courage to the sticking place" he might accomplish the thing of which he had so long dreamed. Did he have the courage?

The blare of a bugle in the parade-ground fell like an irritating blow on his senses. His mind was in a whirl. He began to feel that he was clumsily awkward and hopelessly tongue-tied.

"You haven't informed me yet what you were crying about?" he at last stammered. "You must consider that I am your guardian, now, and tell me what distresses you?"

"Not my father's confessor, though!" she said, shyly. "When I was at school in Santa Barbara I saw the girls and women going every day to confession. You do not mean I shall do anything of that kind?"

"Do not tantalize me," he urged. "I have been trying for a long time to speak to you of something that I have very much wanted to talk about. When I saw you crying that way, the desire became uncontrollable. Have I your permission to speak?"

She avoided his glance and looked down at the carpet.

"I don't know what you mean?"

Crystal Karbun was not an untruthful girl, but she certainly missed the truth in that statement. She may have made herself think she did not know what he meant, but in her secret heart she knew well enough.

Women are naturally keener in such things than are men.

"I see I shall have to tell you, though you must already know it! I love you, Crystal! I have loved you almost from the hour of our acquaintance. I have never ceased to hope, since the moment I saw you standing in the door of your home that bright evening, looking sweeter than any flower of the prairie, that you might some day be my wife."

Now that he had broken the ice, and was head over ears in the icy waters, Daylight plunged along, determined to save himself if he could; but to make a brave dash of it, anyhow, and drown if he must.

A hot flush burned in the girl's cheek.

Almost before he knew what he was doing, Daylight had drawn nearer and his arm was about her waist.

"Tell me that I have not made a fool of myself?" he begged. "Tell me that there is a ray of hope for me, Crystal! I will be a father to you; a brother to you; a husband to you, if you will let me! You do love me, do you not?"

She had upturned her face toward his, and again he saw in her eyes those welling tears.

"You don't know how much I love you, Crofton!" she whispered, almost too softly to be heard.

Then, as he rapturously snatched love's first sweet kiss, the heaven of all happiness seemed suddenly enthroned in the detective's heart.

What further they said it boots not to disclose. They were for the moment supremely happy. And for such happiness the world was built and Eden planted as a garden.

When the first intoxication of love's delight had passed, they talked lowly of the events of the past few days; for this lovers' interview occurred two days after Daylight's return from his unsuccessful search with the cowboy.

"I have not yet given up all hopes!" the detective averred, though his words expressed more than he really believed.

He knew there was a chance, but he had little faith in that one chance.

"I shall continue the search for your father. But if he is not found, if his fate remains a mystery, you will let me be to you more than even he could be?"

She had already given him this promise, but she repeated it; knowing, with womanly intuition, that the big, hulking fellow sought every chance to make her say it over and over.

But she was not prepared for the request that quickly followed this. She was in fact never more surprised in her life:

"I trust you will not refuse, and will not think harshly of me for asking, (for I do it with a good reason,) that you will show me the coffin brand on your arm!"

She fairly reeled from him, so great was her astonishment.

"What do you know about it?" she gasped.

"Ah! you have confessed that there is such a brand. Perhaps I know a great deal more about it than you would think possible. You will allow me to see it, will you not. As I said, I have the best reason in the world for making the request."

She hesitated for a moment, blushing painfully; then she quickly slipped up the sleeve, baring the white arm and permitting him to gaze on the queer, brown brand, that seemed so like a scar.

CHAPTER XIV.

CUTWELL SEES A GHOST.

On the afternoon preceding the evening in which occurred this interview, Lieutenant Arthur Cutwell, having become separated from his men, entered a mesquite thicket that lay some ten miles south of the fort.

He was greatly disturbed over the many shots fired that day by the concealed marksmen from various ambushes.

Cutwell was far from being a coward. On the contrary, he was almost recklessly brave at times, and was accounted by his superiors a most gallant officer. But there was something in the mysterious conduct of this hidden foe that rather unnerved him; and he could not but reflect that two or three of the shots had undoubtedly been aimed at himself.

He could have formed a most reasonable theory, but for one circumstance: a circumstance that rose like a black wall. If Jack Karbun had been living, Jack Karbun would be the very man to do that shooting; but there was nothing more certain in Cutwell's mind than that Karbun was dead.

Daylight, the detective, had, therefore, not been mistaken in his shrewd guesses. Cutwell was the man seen by Crystal staggering through the doorway with that limp form in his arms.

Cutwell recalled vividly how he had ridden away with that burden held across the horse in front of him, and how he had dropped it at a convenient place in the rocky

hills. The muscles of his face worked strangely, showing the twinges at his heart; for such a deed could not rest on any mind as a pleasant contemplation.

He now cautiously advanced, keeping a wary watch ahead, and half-expecting to hear at any moment the report of that hidden gun.

He was annoyed, too, at having become separated from his men. A foolish chase after an antelope had been the cause of it.

Riding to the top of a considerable knoll, which was comparatively free from the encroaching mesquite, he surveyed the surrounding landscape.

A distant dust-cloud attracted him; and, sitting there astride his horse, he drew out of its case a handsome field-glass and fitted it to his eyes.

The dust-cloud resolved itself into the body of troopers he was seeking.

With a sigh of relief he lowered the glass and replaced it in its case.

"Five miles away, if they're a foot! I never was worse out of my reckoning. That antelope led me a longer race than I thought."

Thus soliloquizing, he permitted his gaze to wander idly over the intervening distance.

Something moved near the base of the hill and drew his attention.

He could not have given a more sudden start, if the long-expected bullet had at that moment cut through his hat.

A man, or something in the form of a man, had risen out of a clump of trees; and now advanced staggeringly, with waving hands.

"Jack Karbun!"

The name broke quaveringly from his lips that would be no more pallid in the icy grasp of death.

Cutwell could see the face and form plainly, for the atmosphere was marvelously clear.

There seemed to be a streaking of blood on the features, and to Cutwell's distended eyes the entire appearance of the man was haggard and woe-begone.

But Cutwell did not believe that what he saw was a man. He could not believe it. He had but recently been thinking of Jack Karbun, whom he had left lying dead in the rocky hills so many miles away. If this were not Karbun's ghost, then he felt that an unhealthy fancy had conjured the form out of the depths of a fevered imagination.

When the form continued to advance, waving its hands in that ghostly way, Cutwell wheeled his horse sharply about and plunged blindly and headlong down from the hill and out through the trees.

When he looked back, having gained a position that would give him a fair view of the spot whereon the ghostly figure had stood, he could see nothing; and was more than ever convinced that what he had beheld was not a creature of real flesh and blood.

"I don't think I can ever sleep after that!" he panted, profound terror seizing on him. "Great God! I hope I'm not going crazy!"

So discomfiting was the suggestion, that the sweat oozed in great drops from his icy forehead.

CHAPTER XV.

THE REVELATIONS OF AN OLD LETTER.

Two much astonished people were General and Mrs. Armiston, as Daylight advanced into the sitting-room where they were, drawing Crystal Karbun after him by her clasped hands. Daylight looked smiling and triumphant; and Crystal, confused and blushing, followed him almost unwillingly.

After proudly announcing their engagement, he requested Crystal to exhibit to these people the coffin brand on her arm,

scarcely waiting long enough before doing so for the customary congratulations.

Crystal, with a face that was uncomfortably red, complied; and then, in explanation, Daylight produced and handed to the general a letter.

"Read it aloud," he requested. "It will explain some things you have been long waiting to know."

The general was even more astonished, when he had glanced through its contents. His face paled and his hands shook.

"Where did you get this?" he asked, the paper rattling in his tremulous fingers.

It was evidently a letter and was yellow with age.

"You remember that I went to the ranch, the other day, at Miss Karbun's request, to place one of the cowboys in charge there and to make what search I could for her father. On leaving, she told me to bring to her the papers that were to be found there in a small tin box, as they were her father's papers, and she did not want them disturbed."

"I did not know at the time, though she has since told me, that she had never examined the papers, supposing them to be merely deeds and legal documents of no interest to her."

"When I brought them here, she requested me to look them over at the first opportunity, and give to her any that I thought she ought to see. She did this because she could not bear at that time to look them over herself."

"I obeyed; and that letter came out of the box."

"Miss Karbun knows its contents?" the general questioned, as if loth to begin.

"Yes; we read it over together a little while ago; and, after discussing the subject, decided we would give it to you at once to read."

"You recall what you told me at the time the gold coffin was found missing?"

"Perfectly!" the general replied.

Then he read the letter aloud, though his voice was shaky and broke more than once during the reading.

Space will not permit the giving of the contents in all their detail; nor is it necessary. The facts stated in the letter can be more clearly presented, perhaps, in narrative form, supplemented by some words of explanation.

The letter had been written by Lucy Kinglake, Crystal's mother, and the wife of Jason Kinglake, the soldier, who, it will be remembered, was shot as a deserter. The facts concerning that shooting are fully set forth in the opening pages of this story.

Mrs. Kinglake, writing after her husband's death, made the declaration that when her husband was killed he had in his possession a golden coffin containing jewels of great value, which he was bringing from their old home in the East to their new home in the West.

This golden coffin with its precious contents had become his in a strange way.

In his early manhood he had been a sailor, having entered the service at Portland, Maine, when a mere boy, he being of New England birth. At the age of twenty he had sailed in a merchantman from New York for India. The merchantman had been wrecked in the Indian Ocean, and only he and another sailor had escaped.

After clinging two days to a piece of timber, they were picked up by a passing ship; and he finally succeeded in reaching Calcutta.

He was here a stranger in a strange land, knowing nothing of the language. But a spirit of adventure seizing him he made his way into the interior of the country, employed himself to an Englishman who had a plantation on the borders of the hill country, and remained there nearly three years.

It was a region of jungles and wild beasts; and on one occasion, while hunting with a

large company, he was fortunate enough to save the life of a Rajah from the teeth of a tiger.

The potentate, in gratitude for the service rendered, had given him the golden coffin filled with gems and pearls.

When he at last succeeded in making his way back to his native country, he brought the coffin and its contents with him. He expected to sell the gems, and did sell one diamond for a fabulous price.

About this time he became acquainted with the lady who afterward became his wife and the mother of his child. But when this acquaintance occurred he had already enlisted for a term of five years in the regular army, being led to this act by his insatiable desire for adventure.

He confided the box with its contents to his wife, soon after they were married, and when he knew he would shortly be ordered into the Southwest to quell the Indian invasions.

But he came safely back from this campaign; and for a time they lived a very happy life together at one of the forts within the borders of civilization.

Four years later, and when his term of service lacked but a year of expiration, the trouble began with Victorio's Chiricahua Apaches.

Knowing his company would again be sent to the front, and desiring his wife to be near him, so that he could see her in the intervals between active campaigning, he had sent her, with their child—then two years of age—to a home they had purchased near the scene of expected operations, but which was sufficiently removed from it to afford her safety.

His company being ordered to take part in the movements against Victorio, he had brought the coffin and jewels West on his own person, thinking to be able to see her and place them in her hands; preferring this to leaving them in charge of a banking institution.

His expectations of her were not realized, so active was the campaigning. But he wrote her that he had the box and the jewels, and would bring them to her at the first opportunity.

That opportunity never came.

Instead, he was charged with desertion in the face of the enemy, and was shot for the offense, after a hasty, and, as he believed, most partial and unjust trial.

The news had come to her like a blow, crushing out of her all energy and ambition. She did not even desire to live, except for the purpose of bringing up her little daughter, Crystal.

She had made what search she could for the missing gems, and had written about it to the commander of the expedition, Colonel Armiston. His reply had been that no such box had been in the possession of Jason Kinglake.

She was poor; too poor to employ help to trace the affair; and had at length given up in despair. She might have been rich, had her husband chosen to sell the gems; but he had planned to hold them until his term of service expired, when he meant to sell them and purchase a home in the East, anticipating that they could live in affluence the remainder of their days on the proceeds of the sale.

Mrs. Kinglake failed rapidly, after this; and feeling that she had not long to live, she hit on a device for conveying this information to those who might some day take an interest in it and see that justice was done to the memory of her husband, and to her child if the latter survived.

She wrote this letter, and branded on the arm of the little girl a rude copy of the strange coffin-box in which the jewels had been held.

The letter ended with a prayer that the time might come when the great wrong

would be righted, and the name of Jason Kinglake be cleared of its foul stain.

There was silence for a moment, when the general's trembling voice ceased. All were visibly touched; and Mrs. Armiston and Crystal were crying like two children.

"I am glad, now, that I confided to you the meager facts in my knowledge!" the general said, earnestly, looking at Daylight. "My poor, erring brother! It was a terrible crime."

The Colonel Armiston, who had brought about the death of an innocent man that he might obtain possession of this great wealth, was a brother of the General Armiston known so well to the reader.

He had never profited by his crime. It had hung as a millstone about his neck. He had not parted with the jewels, though continually desiring to do so; and when he died, a few years later, he had made a full confession on his death-bed, to his brother; and, placing the queer coffin in that brother's hands, had besought him to do what he could to find the wife of Jason Kinglake and right the terrible wrong.

General Armiston, hurt immeasurably by the knowledge of the great guilt of his brother, had endeavored to fulfill the promise. He had instituted an elaborate search; but nothing had come of it, and he had ceased to expect that anything ever would come of it.

Nevertheless he had kept the jewels and their queer case, holding his trust inviolate.

"And now that the owner has been found, and the opportunity has come, the jewels are gone!"

As he said it, a sob, that he strove vainly to repress, shook his strong frame.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE DETECTIVE STRIKES A BLOW.

A DAY later, having carried his investigations to a conclusion, the army-post detective placed Lieutenant Arthur Cutwell under arrest.

The charges against the dashing lieutenant were three; and, as will be seen, they were of a most serious character.

He was charged with having abstracted the money that was known to be missing from the paymaster's safe; with having stolen the jewels out of the coffin, at the time it was handed him by Crystal, and of having first stolen the coffin from the general's room and placed it in the balloon; and with the murder of Tom Crawford, one of Jack Karbun's cowboys.

Lieutenant Cutwell turned pale, when he was taken in custody on these charges; but he turned a great deal paler when, a few minutes later, Jack Karbun was ushered into the room.

General Armiston was present and witnessed his relative's downfall; the coming arrest having been made known to him some time before.

At first Armiston would not believe in the guilt of the lieutenant; but when he was shown the bloody coat and informed how and under what circumstances it had come into the detective's possession, and had been shown other indubitable proofs, he withdrew all objections.

"He has sinned!" he said. "Let him suffer! Does treachery run in the blood of the Armistons and their kinsmen? Those jewels! How they have cursed the family! First my brother commits murder to gain them. And now Arthur—"

The general, who was really a fine gentleman and a man of irreproachable life in most respects, bowed like a stricken oak under this sense of misfortune and disgrace.

"Arrest him!" he repeated. "He has sinned; and he must suffer. Surely, not only is the way of the transgressor hard, but he makes bitter the path of all those of his own blood! I had never so thought of it before!"

When Jack Karbun walked into the apartment, looking not unlike the ghost Cutwell thought he had seen, the prisoner drew back in fear and trembling.

"You!" he gasped. "You here!"

"Ay!" and the sturdy ranchman lifted a hand as if he wanted to take Cutwell by the throat. "Old Jack Karbun lacks a good deal of bein' dead. You done up Tom Crawford, though, I reckon, when you thought you was a-doin' up me! An' Tom was a man as was wuth a 'good dozen of ye, any day!"

Karbun meant no violence by his gestures, but Cutwell drew wildly back, imploring protection.

"These charges are all lies!" he asserted, with brazen effrontery. "I have killed no one; and I have stolen nothing. Where is the proof? What have you to bring against me but the senseless mouthings of this ranchman, and the word of this fellow who calls himself a detective? What have you to bring?"

"This, for one thing!" and Daylight took from a package and held up a bloody coat.

"Will you be kind enough, lieutenant, to tell us when and where you saw that last? It is your coat, is it not?"

The crushed man could make no reply, except to break into blasphemous ravings. He was, for the time, half insane with fear and because of the great disgrace that had so suddenly come on him.

"You might as well make a clean breast of it!" Daylight commanded. "You can't lie out of it. I've been on your trail too hotly; and have too many facts to bring against you. It may go easier with you, if you make a confession of your guilt. If you fight the thing and are found guilty, as you surely will be, you can expect no mercy. Having begun, I have no intention of turning back, now!"

Thus driven, Cutwell, after requesting to be left alone with Daylight and the general, broke into a pitiful appeal and told everything, outlining the stealing of the jewel-case from the moment of its conception.

He had indeed hidden it in the balloon, beneath the ballast, intending to slip the anchor rope and get out of the fort safely with it; and, failing in this, and seeing it in Crystal's hands, he had, when the opportunity came, abstracted the jewels; believing the blame would be laid at the door of the ranchman.

To avoid all danger of discovery, he had surreptitiously visited the ranch-house and sought to kill the ranchman, and had thought he had been successful in the attempt.

"You will see that I am not punished too severely!" he begged, clinging penitently and almost frenziedly to the general's hand. "Now that I have confessed, you will try to protect me!"

"Your case will rest with the civil judge of the district!" said General Armiston. "Your appeal must be made to him. You have my pity, but I must not deceive you into thinking I can aid you. He that sins must suffer! It is an irrevocable law!"

CHAPTER XVII.

JACK KARBUN "EXPLANIFIES."

"I GUESS I'd better explain a bit," said Jack Karbun, shortly afterward, in reply to the rain of questions poured on him. "Where have I been? Where did I git them hurts? What have I been a-doin'? Where's them balloons? It'd take a man with ten heads and forty tongues to sling out answers fast enough to satisfy ye!"

He did not "sling out" any of them just then; but opened his arms to receive Crystal who had come running to greet him.

"This hyer girl hain't my daughter, as you've been told; though I wish to goodness that she was. I've never had chick ner child myself; and for that same reason I've clung to her and thought more of her than all the

world besides. And *she's* never been ashamed of the old bear that she thought her dad! Nary!

"The only thing that I'm sorry about is that I let Daylight hyer git ahead o' me in tellin' her the story. I'd had it all figgered out how I'd su'prise her some day, and I'd even scratched down in my noggin some of the most beautiful of the words I meant to say. But I 'low they wouldn't come in handy, now, seein' how things have turned out. They wouldn't be what the gin'ral calls 'apripo.'"

They were in the general's apartments, and were as merry a company as could be expected, in view of the general's grief over the fall of his relative.

"Mr. Daylight hyer," Karbun continued, resting his tongue by seating himself, "says that Tom Crawford was the man killed that night at the ranch. Leastways Tom has turned up missin', and it seems purty clear that somebody was done up that night!

"As fer me, when I got there, after my escape from the balloons, which I'll tell ye all about after while, I didn't find no one to home, and started acrost the prairie torst the fort.

"Some of the cattlemen had it in fer me, it seems; and so they waylaid me when I was about half-way hyer, give me these hyer beauty marks of wounds, and kerried me off into the hills, where they helt me till last night.

"When they seen that the soldiers would be liable to do 'em up if they didn't disband and go home, they let me loose; and it's tuck me the blessed day to git hyer.

"I seen Cutwell out in the hills, an' went torst him, determined to ask him to help me, even though I knowed he wasn't a friend; fer I was that near beat out. But he wheeled his horse and galloped away, leaving me to come on as best I could.

"I got hyer jist after dark, about an hour ago, and Daylight has had me cornered a-talkin' my head off fer the best part o' the time sence."

He stopped, as if he thought he had said enough to satisfy the most exacting.

"But you haven't told where or how you found Crystal, and the letter which the general wrote last night. You haven't told us half the things we wanted to know!"

Daylight, in making this further demand on old Jack Karbun, said nothing of the jewels, nor of the history of the coffin during its stay in the balloon. Lieutenant Cutwell had surrendered the jewels, and had confessed to concealing the coffin beneath the ballast; so that very little explanation was necessary on these points.

Karbun shifted in his chair and rubbed his forehead thoughtfully with his rough fingers.

"All that there happened a good while ago," he avowed, "but I guess I can string it straight yit.

"I was over in the Arizony country some time late in the seventies, doin' a little prospectin', fer I hadn't gone into the ranchin' bizness yit.

"It was while I was a-makin' my way acrost the country, an' when not fur from a little town, that I come onto the girl.

"I was tired and beat out, and hadn't had no worter fer a goodish spell. It was dryer down there in that Arizony region than it is hyer in West Texas in spite of the bombardin' and dynamitin' and rain balloonin'. It was jist so awful dry that my hair fairly curled up like burnt grass. And seein' a house—I naturally moseyed in that direction.

"I calculate I never was so su'prised in my life as I was when I got to that house. They wa'n't only two people in it; a woman and a baby. And the woman was dead, and the baby a-travelin' the same trail nigh about as fast as a rain balloon. That letter was on the table; the letter which you say the general has read.

"I took the baby into town and put her

in good hands; and then hustled out the people to go and look after the woman. They didn't know much about her, and that little wa'n't of much consequence.

"Well, we buried her; and when the baby was well and strong ag'in I left the country, takin' her with me. The letter said her name was Crystal Kinglake; but inasmuch as I had adopted her as my daughter, I called her Crystal Karbun. The 'nitals air the same, you see; so the change wasn't as great as it might 'a' been.

"I made what search I could for her felks, but it didn't do no good; and finally I settled out hyer and went to ranchin'.

"I had a Mexican cowboy a-workin' fer me, who was married, and his wife took jist as good care of the girl as if she had been her own child.

"I had one o' the cowboys, who'd been educated at some way-up eastern college, give Crystal the benefit of what he knowed. She tuck to learnin', and she tuck to this hyer college cowboy; and fer a long time we had a regular school down there at the ranch-house.

"Finally, when she was old enough an' had avanced enough, I sent her to a slap-up, high-toned boardin' school in Californy, where I ordered 'em to give her the polishin' of an education, reegardless of expense.

"An' you bet they done it! And if old Jack Karbun does say it, what hadn't ort to, there ain't to-day a finer lady in the land!"

The love that was in the look he gave Crystal, with this fervent declaration, was inexpressible. It told that he did indeed love her as a daughter.

"There's jist one p'int more!" Karbun averred, looking toward the general. "I don't hold no ill feelin's for Gin'ral Armiston there; an' shall try to fergit everything that happened hyer at the fort the other day. He made me p'izen mad, an' I struck him; fer which I begs his pardon. It ain't often that I lifts my hand ag'in' any man; an' I never do, unless my temper jist naterally b'iles over so that I can't help it; which was the case in that there instance!"

"But I want to say that when I went into that room, I was directed to do it by Lieutenant Cutwell hisself. I was a-wantin' to see the gin'ral on the subjec' o' this hyer cattle trouble, havin' rid over to the fort fer that very purpose.

"He wasn't to be seen, an' I found out a few minutes later that he wasn't in the fort. But Cutwell said he thought Gin'ral Armiston was in that room; an' me, not knowin' much about military etyket, walked in there; an', in doin' of it, I walked into the trap."

The explanation was so satisfactory that General Armiston arose, and, taking the old ranchman by the hand, begged his forgiveness for the harsh manner in which he had been treated.

"It's all right, gin'ral!" came the warm response. "You was jist drivin' along a wrong trail, that was all. I never holds a thing of that kind ag'in' a feller human creeter, when I see there's been a mistake. I allus lets by-gones be by-gones!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

CONCLUSION.

ONE of the first tasks to which General Armiston applied himself was the righting, so far as it lay in his power, of the great wrong done to the memory of Jason Kinglake. By means of proper affidavits, the damaging charge which stood against Kinglake in the military records was erased, and the known facts set forth there in their true light.

A great sensation was created at the fort a few days later, by the capture of the mysterious rifleman, who proved to be Tom Crawford.

The poor fellow was insane, and fought as only a madman can, when the troopers surrounded him and forced his surrender. He

would not have been taken so easily, only that he had exhausted his ammunition.

He was suffering from a severe wound on the head, which had brought on this temporary insanity; for it proved but temporary; he recovering in the course of a few days thereafter under proper treatment.

Tom Crawford had been the man found by Lieutenant Cutwell at the ranch-house that night and assaulted there by him. Crawford had just come in off the range, and had not yet lighted a lamp or started a fire. He did not know that Cutwell was on the place, and suspected no danger. Cutwell, who had got there in advance of him, and was concealed in the room, rushed on him, engaged him in a struggle, and dealt him the blow that stretched him limp and senseless on the floor.

This was the struggle and fall heard by Crystal; and Cutwell, hearing her at the door and fearing discovery, had lifted his victim, carried him from the house, and had thrown him across his horse and ridden away.

Thinking him Jack Karbun, and that he was dead, he had freed himself of the burden in the rocky hills.

But Tom Crawford was not dead. He regained consciousness in the course of a few hours, returned to the ranch, and armed himself.

Crazed by the blow and conceiving an insane hatred for all soldiers—in the dim light just before the falling of the blow he had recognized Cutwell's uniform—he had lain out in the mesquite, seeking to slay all that came his way.

Thus it was shown that Lieutenant Cutwell, although attempting murder, was not guilty of its actual commission. But the attempted murder, with the robberies, was sufficient to give him a long term of imprisonment; a thing he very justly deserved, and from which the general did not in the least attempt to shield him.

One bright autumn evening, a few months later, a scene of lively commotion might have been witnessed at Fort Mesquite. The buildings constituting that military post on the Texas plains were brilliantly illuminated, and men were grouped in the rooms and on the parade grounds in various garrulous knots, discussing an event in which all seemed much interested.

The occasion of all this, was the coming wedding of Crofton Dalite, the army-post detective, to Crystal, the adopted daughter of Jack Karbun, the ranchman.

The band, having caught the infection, had played their best airs in the grounds, under the shadow of the waving American flag. The music was stilled now, however, and tongues wagged, where, a short while before, had been heard the strains of "Little Annie Rooney."

The post chaplain performed the marriage ceremony with appropriate and becoming solemnity, in the presence of a vast concourse of friends and well-wishers.

It was said the bride had never looked so beautiful, nor Dalite so manly and handsome; and in this estimate the general judgment was correct. Crystal was fairer than any flower that bloomed on the prairies over which she had so often reamed; and the effect of her charms was not lessened by the costly pearls that shimmeringly adorned her person, and which had come out of the golden coffin of memorable history.

After many congratulations, General Armiston approached; and, bending low over the hand of the bride, said, with his well-bred grace:

"Permit me to wish you a long and happy wedded life, with all the joys that should come from a union of wedded hearts!"

Let us wish them the same; and say,

"Good Night!"

THE END.

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